

DIAMOND~DICK

BOYS BEST

JR WEEKLY JR.

Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 296.

Price, Five Cents.

DIAMOND DICK JR'S RUN OF LUCK

OR
THE TWIST-UP AT TERRIBLE



ONE OF THE MEN THREW A SERAPA OVER DIAMOND DICK, JR.'S, HEAD, AND DRAGGED HIM BACKWARD.

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Diamond Dick, Jr.'s, Run of Luck;

OR,

THE TWIST-UP AT TERRIBLE.

By the author of "DIAMOND DICK."

CHAPTER I.

A RED-HANDED CONSPIRACY.

"Who are you? You are disguised now, an' I never talk with a man unless I know him."

"Nevertheless, you will talk with me, and you will not know who I am, either. If you wish to address me, you will simply call me the Unknown."

It was in the back room of a little adobe house in Winslow, Arizona, that this conversation was taking place. A flickering candle on a rough board table threw a pale glare of light into the faces of the two men who were talking.

One of the men, a typical border desperado in appearance, was known as El Raton, "the mouse." If his size had anything to do with his pseudonym he should have been called "the rat."

He stood over six feet in his stockings, was brawny of chest and muscular. He had a hooked nose that resembled the beak of some bird of prey, a ragged

coal-black beard and a tangled mat of hair of the same hue.

He called himself the "boss of the town of Terrible," but where Terrible was nobody seemed to know.

The other party to the conversation was a small man who had tied a black silk handkerchief over his face so that only his eyes were visible.

"Well, Mister Unknown," said Raton, "now that ye've got me here what d'ye want of me?"

"You're a head man among the Moqui Indians are you not?"

"They seem to have consid'able confidence in me. In fact, they've booked me fer a specialty at the comin' snake dance."

"That ought to prove your standing," said the Unknown, with a grim chuckle.

"Sure."

"Do you know of a girl, a half-caste, living at one of the pueblos and called Mercedes?"

Raton flashed a peculiar look into the eyes above the silk handkerchief.

"What of her?"

"Do you know her?"

"Yes."

The Unknown's eyes grew small and crafty as he leaned back in his chair and bent them on the face of the man before him.

"She is an important witness for the Government in the Peralta-Reavis land suit."

"Well?"

"The Government will send its agents after her."

"What of it?"

"Mercedes must not be found by those agents. Within a day or two she must suddenly disappear —"

"If this is a killin' job, I wash my hands of it."

"It is not a killing job. I am not in that business. It is not necessary for a person to die in order to disappear. Mercedes can be abducted."

"And you want me to do it?"

"That's my purpose in coming here."

"How much is there in it?"

"Five thousand dollars."

Raton reflected for a few moments.

"I'll take the job," he finally said. "By thunder, I'll move the gal over to Terrible, an' neither man 'r devil'll be able to find her."

"I can depend upon you, then?" said the Unknown, rising.

"Pervidin' you give me a part of the money down."

The little man's hand disappeared within his pocket, and then reappeared again, this time containing a roll of bills.

"There are one thousand dollars. I will be here every month for four months at this place, at this hour, on the first day of each month, and give you a like amount each time."

"That's satisfactory."

"Then our business is done for the present, and there is nothing to keep me here. Good-night to you."

"Good-night, pardner."

The little man in the black mask went away.

Raton listened at the door until his footsteps died out in the distance, then he put his fingers to his lips and blew a whistle signal.

An answer was immediately returned.

Shortly afterward a man with the face of a ruffian and the swagger of a braggodocio came into the room.

"Howdy, Raton."

"Howdy, Buford. Sit down."

Buford dropped into the chair that had recently been vacated by the Unknown.

"Seen yer man?"

"Yes."

"What's up?"

"Never mind; you'll get a share in the dicker, of course, but leave the handling of it to me. Got anythin' on yer mind."

"You bet, a hull lot."

"Well, spit it out."

"A feller by the name of Diamond Dick, Jr., is in town."

"I've heard of that young whippersnapper. He's gittin' too big fer his clothes. If I had time I'd paralyze him."

"You'll have ter take time."

"What's that?"

"I say you'll have to take time."

"Why?"

"'Kase he's come yere ter look up yer record."

Raton's face grew black.

"He'd better look out how he monkeys with me at this pertickler time. I won't take any foolishness from him. Whar did ye find out 'bout this?"

"Over at Pulsiver's joint. Diamond Dick, Jr., was there sizin' up the faro an' roulette layouts. I had a scrap with a cowboy that calls himself Lerue——"

"Sam Lerue! Dash that chap!"

"I knew ye didn't like him, an' when he caught me shiftn' the cut in a poker game an' told me of it, I called him a liar, an' we went at it, hammer an' tongs. He knocked me through a winder."

"I don't wonder at it. He's as strong as a horse. This Diamond Dick, Jr., like as not, will get onto the job I'm about to do fer that Unknown and will do his best to break it wide open. There's only one thing to be done—he's got to be disposed of."

"You mean to put out his light?"

"Yes—it means five thousand, cold."

"It's one thing to say you're going ter do it an' another thing ter do it. He's a wiry young whelp, that Diamond Dick, Jr."

"We can fix him up at the Moqui pueblo."

"How?"

"During the snake dance. Leave that part of it to me."

"Are you goin' ter leave any of it to me?"

"Yes. You've got to get Diamond Dick, Jr., to the pueblo."

"That's ther hardest part of the whole deal."

"Don't ye b'lieve it. Is he stopping at the hotel?"

"Yes."

"Then you and some of the other boys can lay for him to-morrow night. If he leaves the hotel—as he surely will—slip up behind him and throw a serape over his head. You can manage it all right. After you get him, take him north to the Moqui pueblo."

"I'll try it on, but I want ter tell ye it's a dern risky business. Diamond Dick, Jr., is handy with his guns if all I hear about him is true."

"Ye can gamble that all ye hear about him ain't true. He's human like the rest of us. If you understand what you're to do, you might mosey on and see the boys who're to help you."

"Keno, pard," returned Buford, getting up and stretching his lank form. "Ye'll hear from me purty pronto."

With these words he left the house.

CHAPTER II.

A COUNTER-PLOT.

Diamond Dick, Jr., was smoking a cigar in the little six-by-ten office of the hotel in Winslow.

He had not come to that section of the country particularly to look into El Raton's past record, gory and full of crime though it might have been.

Buford's information had been obtained second-hand, and was not correct.

While Bertie sat in the office, smoking and thinking, a tall, broad-shouldered cowboy advanced toward him and dropped a hand on his arm.

"What can I do for you?" asked our hero.

"You're Diamond Dick, Jr.?"

"Yes."

"Wall, my name's Sam Lerue. I'm purty well known hereabouts. Got a few cattle o' my own, an' I go out with the boys an' do a little cow-punchin', now an' then. I'm tol'able swift with a gun an' rather handy with blacksnake whip an' a riata."

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Lerue."

"Then it's hoss an' hoss, 'kase I'm glad ter make yours, too."

Lerue looked around the little office.

It was full of miners and cattlemen, all smoking and talking.

"Kin ye take me some place whar I kin talk to ye without bein' overheard by this raft of fellers?"

"Certainly," answered Bertie; "come up to my room."

Ascending the stairs, Bertie ushered his new-found friend into the little, box-like apartment where he slept.

"The partitions are pretty thin, Lerue," he said. "If you keep your voice tolerably low, however, I guess you won't be overheard. Now, what is it you want to tell me?"

"I'm not goin' to waste any time comin' to the point, Diamond Dick, Jr. Thar's a gal called Mercedes as lives up at the Moqui settlements. She's part Injun an' part Mexican, but she likes me an' I like her. She's promised ter marry me."

"Allow me to congratulate you!"

"That's all right, pard, but you'd better save yer congratulations till after the weddin'. We ain't married yet, an' it looks as though mebbe we wouldn't be."

"What's the matter?"

"This here chap what goes by the name of Raton is mixin' himself up in the deal, an' I reckon he's goin' ter try ter knock me out."

"He's your rival, is he?"

"Well I wouldn't call him exactly a rival. Ye see, Mercedes is in a position to help the Gov'ment out in this Peralta-Reavis land suit that people are talkin' so much about."

"Ah, I see!"

"And the Peralta-Reavis folks want to get her out of the way so the Gov'ment can't find her. Sabe?"

"And they have hired Raton to do the job?"

"That's the idee. But I might as well begin at the front end of my story an' tell it clean through. Do you remember seein' me at that drinkin' j'int last night?"

"Yes."

"I remember seein' you there. If you recollect I had a scrap with a feller that I caught monkeying with the poker deck."

"Yes; if I remember rightly, you threw him through a window."

"Ye see, the winder happened ter be handier than the door. That fellow's name is Nick Buford. He b'longs, body an' soul, to Raton. I've got an idee

that Raton an' Buford murdered a pardner of mine an' I've been watchin' 'em fer a long time ter find out somethin' that would convince me beyond all doubt that they did the deed. When Buford pulled himself together, after his knock-out, I follered him. He went out to the edge of town among the Mexican 'dobes, and laid low behind a pile of cordwood. He was not over twenty yards from a shanty through one of whose winders a light was shinin'. As I stood thar, I saw a man pass through the light an' stop long enough to tie a black handkerchief over his face. Arter he got the handkerchief fixed, he went into the house. Now, I haven't got any compunc-tions about listenin' to any conversation Raton holds unbeknowns to him, an' I jest slipped around to the other side of the house and got onto this plot against Mercedes. I want ye ter help me save that gal. Raton has got all the Moquis back of him, as well as a lot of cutthroats from this 'ere town of 'Terrible, and it's me against the hull shootin' match, unless you'll lend a hand."

"I will, gladly," said Bertie.

Lerue reached out one of his big fists and caught Bertie's hand in a cordial clasp.

"You're white, pilgrim, an' I like ye. You're fixin' ter do me a good turn an' I ain't goin' to fer-git you, nuther. Say, thar's trouble ahead o' you!"

"What kind of trouble?"

"Raton has got it in for you!"

"For me? Why, I never did the man any harm—in fact, I wouldn't know him if I should meet him."

"Arter the man with the black handkerchief over his face got up and dusted, Buford came in an' told Raton that you had come to Winslow jest purposely to look inter Raton's past record. That set Raton ter growlin', and he has an idee that if you git to mon-keyin' with him you're goin' to prevent him, in some way, from makin' five thousand dollars by abducting Mercedes."

"That's about the first thing I would do."

"Some of Raton's men are goin' ter lay fer you to-night."

"Where?"

"Right yere in the vicinity of this hotel. If you leave the place one of the rascals is goin' ter come up behind ye an' throw somethin' over yer head; then you're goin' ter be tied an' kerried up to the Moqui settlements."

"What are they going to carry me up there for?"

"To-morrow the Moquis have their great snake dance, an' Raton is booked for one of the performers. In some way he destines that dance to be the death of you. The rattlesnakes are to seal your doom."

Bertie was silent for a few moments.

At last he said:

"There is one way we can save Mercedes."

"How?"

"By my falling in with Raton's plot against me."

"You mean——"

"I mean to let him capture me. That will prevent him from abducting Mercedes until after the snake dance."

"Great Jupiter! You'll be killed!"

Bertie smiled.

"I think I can take care of myself. You'll have to see to getting Mercedes away while Raton is occupied with the snake dance. Can you arrange to be up there in some manner unknown to Raton?"

"Can I? You bet I can. Say, I can talk Moqui like a buck. I'll disguise myself as an Indian and they'll think I'm a visitor from one of the other pueblos."

"You can work the scheme all right, can you?"

"I should say; and I won't be runnin' half the risk you are. But how are you going to protect yourself?"

Bertie saw the handle of a blacksnake whip sticking out of one of Lerue's pockets.

"Have you got another whip like that?"

"I can git one. Know how to use it?"

"Let me have it and I'll show you."

Lerue produced the whip and handed it to Bertie.

Standing a short distance away, the youth threw the long, sinuous whip behind him.

Crack!

Like lightning the long buckskin lash curved through the air, and an instant later, Bertie had whipped the knife from Lerue's belt and had hurled it against the opposite side of the room where it clung quivering to the wall.

To the uninitiated, the feat would have seemed an impossible one; to our hero it came perfectly easy.

"Bully!" cried Lerue; "you're all right! You want another?"

"Yes."

"Wait half a minute and I'll get it."

The cowboy hurried out.

In a few moments he returned with another whip almost identical with the first.

"Good!" exclaimed Bertie; "I'll carry these with me to the Moqui pueblo."

"Not much! Raton's men will take them away from you."

"We'll see about that."

Hastily stripping himself to the waist, Bertie wrapped the whips about him, next to the skin; he then resumed his clothing.

"Do you think that will fool Raton's men, Lerue?"

"By thunder, you're a daisy! When Mercedes an' I git hitched, you've got ter be thar!"

"I will."

"If thar's nothin' more to be said, reckon I'll pull out an' begin' paintin' myself up. Quite a job ter change inter a Moqui an' do it scientific."

"I should think it would be."

"Sure you're ekal to the emergency? I don't want to deceive ye, Diamond Dick, Jr. You're takin' the gravest kind o' chances."

"I'm used to taking chances."

"I b'leeve ye. You kin depend on my bein' up thar. Good-by, ole man."

"Good-by, Lerue."

Their next meeting was at the Moqui pueblo.

CHAPTER III.

BLACKSNAKE VERSUS RATTLESNAKE.

Diamond Dick, Jr., carried out his plans exactly as he had laid them.

In the evening he walked out of the hotel in a careless manner, and made his way across the railroad tracks.

He was pleased to note that Sam Lerue was evidently right regarding Raton's intentions toward himself, for two rough-looking men who were hanging about the front door of the hotel followed him stealthily.

Bertie decided to give them every advantage in his power, and wended his way toward a portion of the town where the houses were few and scattered.

Apparently he did not look back, yet he, nevertheless, kept himself well informed of the actions of the two men behind him.

The two men drew closer and closer.

The youth finally stopped with the evident intention of lighting a cigar.

This was an opportunity purposely given to his enemies, and they were not slow in taking advantage of it.

Springing up behind him, one of them threw a serape over his head and dragged him backward.

Diamond Dick, Jr., of course, could not give up without a struggle, and he floundered about in an apparently earnest endeavor to free himself.

The second man appeared very shortly with a rope, and our hero was bound tightly and gagged "to the king's taste."

The man who had so successfully used the serape then whistled and, from out the darkness, appeared a companion riding one horse and leading three others.

"What luck?" he hailed, hoarsely.

"Handled him as though he had been an infant," was the reply. "From what I had heard of Diamond Dick, Jr., I thought he was about nine feet high and had horns. Quick! Load him onto that hoss an' tie him into the saddle."

This was accomplished very expeditiously, and the journey commenced.

It was a long ride, and, as the serape still covered Diamond Dick, Jr.'s head, he could not tell where he was being taken, but knew it must be in the direction of the Moqui pueblos, to the north of Winslow.

After a long journey, the horses were brought to a standstill and a number of people surrounded the little party, all talking together and in a strange tongue.

They were undoubtedly at the Indian settlements.

At a word from one of Bertie's captors, the voices were hushed.

An interval of silence passed, and then the youth was lifted out of the saddle, conveyed along a crooked path and, finally, the bonds were jerked from his hands and he was cast violently to the floor.

As he fell he heard a door slammed shut and a bar dropped across it on the outside.

Leaping up, he tore the serape from his head and the gag from his mouth.

He found himself in profoundest darkness.

In a few moments he distinguished a faint light falling across the gloom.

The light was that of a moonlight night admitted through a window—a narrow window, heavily barred.

Groping about him, he at last made out that he was in a small, square room with adobe walls, evidently a part of the Indian pueblo.

He had barely finished his examination and seated himself on a low, wooden stool, when a voice hailed him from without.

"Diamond Dick, Jr."

It was a whisper, but Bertie recognized the voice as belonging to Sam Lerue.

"What do you want, Lerue?"

"They didn't hurt ye, did they?"

"No, and you?"

"I've got on my visiting paint, and they think I'm a buck from another pueblo, come to witness the snake dance to-morrow."

"How about Mercedes?"

"Raton is watching her himself. He will have to leave her to-morrow, however, to do the snake dance."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Raton has two of the best horses that he can get hold of. Right after the dance he's going to skip with the girl. I intend to skip with the girl, instead, and have secured another horse, so that you can go with us."

"Good!" muttered Bertie; "I'll fix Raton so he won't be able to follow."

"If you can do that, you're a dandy."

"Is somebody going to help you?"

"Yes—Mercedes' mother. She's the head woman of the tribe, and is a power among these heathen, I can tell you. There are only three people who know what the dope is composed of that the chief gives the dancers to ward off the effects of the snake poison. Raton will get his hide full of this before he tackles those rattlers, you may gamble on that."

"How will the tribe look upon this high-handed act of Raton's—stealing away the daughter of the head woman of the tribe?"

"The tribe 'll take it kinder hard, I reckon, an' jest 'kase Mercedes' mother is high priestess among them. But Raton won't care a rap. He's going to Terrible, the town he's started on the other side of nowhere. Of course, Mercedes' mother, being on our side, she won't allow them to hunt us very hard. Say, I can lift this bar and let ye out o' thar, if ye want to come."

"Not on your life! That would spoil the whole thing. You had better go away, now. If some prowl-

ing buck were to overhear you, the game would be up."

"All right. Look out for yourself, to-morrow, though. Don't let one of those rattlers bite you."

"It will be rattlesnake against blacksnake, and you may gamble that blacksnake will come out ahead."

"I hope so. By, by," and Sam Lerue left the door.

Lying down on the hard floor, Bertie, despite his exciting situation, slept like a log.

He was awakened with a rough kick, and opened his eyes to find that it was broad daylight and that he was surrounded by six Moqui Indians. Stamping with his foot, the leader of the bucks pointed toward the door.

Bertie got up and started out, the bucks forming a circle about him and moving along with him. It was, indeed, a pueblo of the Moquis where our hero had been confined.

Outside were a number of the renegade whites, all formed in a large circle, the Indians—bucks, women and children—standing in a row behind.

Bertie was conducted to the center of this circle and his red attendants left him.

The night before our hero had been relieved of his weapons—all except the blacksnake whips which he had wrapped about his body next the skin.

Before going to sleep in his prison chamber, he had taken the precaution to remove the short-handled whips, coil them up and place them one in each of his coat pockets.

He was glad now that he had had this forethought.

Raton's men held drawn revolvers in their hands, with the evident grim intention of preventing any break for freedom on Bertie's part.

If the Moquis themselves had any knowledge of Raton's murderous intentions their stolid faces did not show it.

Suddenly the crowd parted and Raton himself leaped into the ring.

At one side was a rude corral filled with a half hundred or more hissing and writhing snakes.

Raton's broad, sinewy chest was bare.

He wore only trousers and moccasins.

A low murmur went up from the Indians as he appeared.

With a malignant look into the eyes of Diamond Dick, Jr., the renegade leaped over among the snakes

and then leaped back again, with two of the furiously angry reptiles writhing about his hands and wrists.

Thrice around Diamond Dick, Jr. did he dance in a slow, halting manner.

Bertie never took his eyes off him, but thrust his hands in his pockets and clutched the handles of his whips.

Raton suddenly paused.

Then, throwing himself abruptly forward on his right foot, he hurled one of the hissing serpents directly at Diamond Dick, Jr. Crack!

With a report like that of a pistol, Bertie snapped his whip at the writhing object, the keen leather cutting the reptile in twain as a knife might have done.

For an instant Raton was dumfounded; and then, with an oath of anger, he hurled the remaining reptile.

It met the same fate as the first.

Raton started for the corral at a run, but Bertie was not through.

His two whips operated simultaneously with both hands, snapped together, their lashes striking the renegade's eyes.

With a howl of anger, Raton leaped into the air and then rushed wildly about, seeking to lay hands on Diamond Dick, Jr.

At this moment a shrill whistle cut the air, and Bertie saw Lerue and Mercedes ride into sight leading a horse for him.

He dashed toward them, throwing open the gate of the snake corral as he passed it.

This had all been accomplished very quickly.

At first the white renegades did not seem able to understand the situation.

It suddenly dawned upon them, however, and one, who appeared to be the leader, fired his revolver at the fleeing form of Diamond Dick, Jr., shouting as he did so:

"Don't let the young whelp escape! After him, every mother's son of ye!"

Away they dashed, whites and Indians, in a wild pursuit.

But they had not proceeded a dozen yards when a woman upstarted in their path.

It was Mercedes' mother.

She was immensely tall, was dressed in the softest buckskin, ornamented with beads and dyed porcupine quills.

Her long black hair floated out behind her.

Over her shoulders and down under her arms writhed an immense serpent, its head reared high above her own, its eyes glowing like twin coals of fire, and its forked tongue darting from its mouth.

"Stop!"

The pursuers came to an abrupt pause.

"Don't stop for that she-devil!" shouted the leader of the renegades; "push on!"

Suiting his action to the word, the white leader attempted to pass the high priestess of the Moquis.

With a toss of her arm the serpent dropped across the man's path, a living barrier.

Uttering an oath, he drew his knife and would have slashed it across the brilliant coils of the snake had not the Indians, with a cry of horror, leaped forward and caught his arm.

"Make a dash for it, boys," yelled the white leader; "never mind me—it's Diamond Dick, Jr., we're after!"

It was impossible, however, for the white renegades to follow this command, for, at a word from the priestess, the Indians threw themselves upon the followers of Raton and prevented pursuit.

This was easily accomplished, as the redskins outnumbered the whites three to one.

The result was that Diamond Dick, Jr., Lerue and Mercedes made good their escape.

— — —

CHAPTER IV.

SMOKE RINGS.

After a dozen miles, swiftly sped over, the little party of three fleeing from the Moqui pueblos came to a halt at a small stream known as Pony Creek.

"Let's breathe our critters," said Sam Lerue, "an' take a little air ourselves. This has been the busiest mornin' I've seen for a month of Sundays. Diamond Dick, Jr., yer hand. You've befriended me in a manner I'll never forget."

"The least said about that the better I will like it," replied our hero.

"I expect so—that's the way with fellers of your caliber, but I'm goin' ter speak my sentiments whether ye will have it or no. I'd give somethin' purty if I could handle a blacksnake as slick as you kin. Mercedes, shake hands with a man who has done a tarnation big thing fer us both!"

The half-caste was a beautiful girl.

She had retained enough of the Castilian in her make-up to soften the coarser features of the Indian, and her eyes were simply superb. Riding up to Bertie, she presented her hand with unaffected good feeling.

"Gracias, amigo mio," she said, and her voice was soft and musical; "I t'ank you mucho."

"I am glad to have been of service," returned the youth.

"The way you put the lashes to Raton's eyes," went on Lerue, "was beautiful to see. Did you blind him?"

"Only temporarily," was the answer.

"You could have cut out his eyeballs as easy as a doctor with a lancet."

"That would have been barbarous."

"Toby sure, pard; but the scoundrel would have killed ye."

"Nevertheless, I would not sink myself to his level. Where would you go now?"

"We stay here," broke in Mercedes.

"Why here?"

"I wait for smoke rings, senor; smoke rings that summon me to mi madre. Ah, ay de mi! My arm—it bleeds. A kerchief, novio!"

The shot fired by the leader of the white renegades had wounded Mercedes in the arm.

"Only a flesh wound," remarked Bertie, critically examining the bleeding cut.

Lerue tore the kerchief from about his neck and tenderly bound it over the wound.

"So, querida mia!" Then he turned to Bertie. "She says, Diamond Dick, Jr., that she waits here for smoke rings that will summon her to her mother."

"So I understood."

"You know the Spanish, then?"

"Good enough for a chingado Americano, but not perfectly. Why is your mother to summon you, Mercedes?"

The girl straightened herself up proudly in her saddle, drew a little, jeweled dirk from her bosom and kissed the shimmering blade.

"We no finished with the Mouse!"

"She means Raton," exclaimed Lerue.

"I will follow him like a shadow," said Bertie.

"Leave that work to Lerue and me. It is not for you!"

"For me, yes! I have sworn it!"

A thousand stilettos leaped from her dark eyes as the words passed her lips.

"She'll never forgive Raton fer what he this day attempted to do," put in Lerue. "Ner her mother, either. Ye can't persuade 'em ag'in it. It's their natur', Diamond Dick, Jr.—bred in the bone, filtered into the blood. Mark what I tell ye—either Mercedes or her mother'll have Raton's life."

Seeing the uselessness of attempting to persuade the girl against the course which she had evidently laid out for herself, Bertie merely bowed his head.

"When are we to look for the smoke rings?"

Lerue cast an inquiring look at his sweetheart.

She raised herself in her saddle and looked eastward across the mesa.

"At any time, senor," she said. "That I not can tell. It will be yonder. Perhaps madre mia has the deed already done? Carraca! If so, she is so quick like—like the lightning!"

"No use settin' in our saddles like stoughton bottles," said Lerue. "S'pos'n we dismount?"

They were all saddle-weary and glad of a chance to rest.

"You say," said Bertie, throwing himself down on a grassy ledge, "that Raton calls himself the 'boss of the town of Terrible?'"

"That's what he calls himself."

"If I remember rightly, you said that Terrible was located on the other side of 'Nowhere.'"

Lerue laughed.

"So I drd, pard. On t'other side of Nowhar, jest south of Noplace."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, if a man commits a murder, or steals a big lot o' money, or is close pressed by the law fer anythin', all he has to do is ter head this way, acknowledge Raton as his boss and then an' thar he is a citizen of Terrible. That feller disappears. Whar he goes, people have been tryin' ter find out fer the past six months."

"Then no one knows where this town is?"

"Not a soul."

"Perhaps there is no such place?"

"Then whar do all these thieves, highwaymen an' murderers go?"

"Surely it can be found if it has an existence."

"I've seen sheriffs as swore it was neither on the grounds ner above ner below it; an' yet they took an oath, in the same breath, that thar was sech a place."

"That's absurd. If there is such a town it can be found; if there is no such town it can be proven."

"I'll find the place or else prove it a myth before I leave the country."

"S'pose ye'd run slam-bang inter the town. 'Twouldn't be healthy fer you or any other man."

"I'm usually healthy wherever I am," was the smiling rejoinder.

"The smoke rings!" cried Mercedes, springing up suddenly and pointing eastward.

The other two started to their feet.

Off, over the plain, could be seen little puffs of black smoke, in the shape of circles, rising against the white sky.

"That is my signal," added the girl, leaping into her saddle.

"It is our signal, also," supplemented Bertie.

"No, senor," said the girl.

"What!" exclaimed Lerue; "are we not to go with ye?"

"I am to go with none—alone myself."

"Why?"

"Porque?" She shook her head with a soft smile.

"I know not. It is the wish of madre mia. Look you, novio! I return when the shadow of this tree is there reaching."

Leaning down from her saddle, she dropped the lash of her quirt upon the ground.

"That means two hours," mused Lerue.

With a light laugh, she bounded away.

"We ought to follow her," said Bertie.

"Jes' wait till ye git inter love an' then ye'll find out who has the say!" Lerue shrugged his shoulders.

"Let 'er go. Thar'd be a pretty row if we didn't."

"But suppose——"

"We won't suppose anythin', pard, but that she'll be back when that shadder gits whar she said."

"If she's not back then?"

Lerue frowned darkly.

"In that case, somethin's goin' ter happen to somebody, kase Mercedes never yet broke her word."

Bertie again dropped down on the ground and allowed his horse to crop the grass.

Gradually the shadow of the tree swept around toward the point where Mercedes' lash had fallen.

As it drew nearer the point, Lerue evidenced considerable anxiety.

His eyes were constantly fixed upon the east. The shadow reached the point—it passed it!

With a muttered exclamation, Lerue leaped into his saddle.

"Thar's deviltry afoot," he cried. "Are ye with me, Diamond Dick, Jr.?"

"Heart and soul!"

"Then let's make for the place whar them smoke rings started!"

On at a wild gallop they pressed, the horses fresh and eager as the riders that mounted them.

"Are your eyes good?" asked Bertie.

"Good enough; but it 'u'd take the ole Nick himself ter locate that one point on the broad miles of this rolling mesa!"

"I can take you directly to the spot."

"How so?"

"If your nostrils were as good as your eyes, perhaps you could tell."

"I kain't figger it."

"In this country, it took timber to make that smoke."

"Grass 'u'd do it."

"No; the smoke was like India ink. Mercedes' mother burned some pieces of green palo verdi. While burning green that wood gives off a peculiar odor——"

"Sure! Then Mercedes went to that little clump of trees on the wash yonder!"

"Exactly!"

A practical demonstration bore out Bertie's theory. At the base of a tall cottonwood were some pieces of half-burned palo verdi wood.

"But where is Mercedes?"

"In Heaven's name, look thar!"

A strip of bark had been peeled from the cottonwood. Turned over, it was fastened, bark to bark, to the trunk of the tree with a dagger.

On the smooth white surface, written in red, were the words:

MESA ENCATADA.

"My God!" cried Lerue, reeling in his saddle.

"Steady!" said Bertie. "Keep your nerve, Sam. What is it?"

"She traced it with her finger in blood from her wounded arm."

"She must have done so. And it is her dagger that pins the scrap of bark to the shaft of the tree!"

CHAPTER V.

A BAND OF MAN HUNTERS.

For several minutes there was deep silence.

"'Mesa Encatada,' " read Bertie, from the slip of bark; then he translated the words into English:

"'The Haunted Mesa.' What is it?"

"A lone rock, its sides almost unscalable, hundreds of feet in height. On its top, over its whole extent, is a mesa. It was inhabited hundreds of years ago, the Indians say, by a tribe called the Querse. But one trail of horrible difficulty led to the top. One day, centuries ago, an inundation undermined this trail, and scores of people died helplessly on the plateau, kase they couldn't come down. Since then they say it is haunted."

"Is it far from here?"

"Twenty-five miles, I sh'd say."

"Let me tell you something, Lerue."

"What?"

"The town of Terrible is located on the Haunted Mesa!"

Lerue gave a start.

"Ye think then Raton himself has worked this deviltry?"

"Didn't he say he would carry Mercedes away to the town?"

"But no one kin climb that rock."

"That is supposition. Nowadays people may do anything."

"What has become of Mercedes' mother?"

The youth shook his head.

"We can only answer that question by delving into the mystery. Perhaps it was Raton, and not her, who sent up the smoke rings. It is possible Raton discovered her plan and decoyed Mercedes into his power by means of the smoke signal."

"If he did," cried the cowboy, "by Heaven! I will have his life!"

To emphasize his words, Lerue brought his fist down on the saddle bow in front of him.

"It was foolish of us to let Mercedes come alone. I felt that it was at the time."

"Women are women. When they want to do a thing, I reckon they're goin' ter do it in spite of fate. That's my experience."

Bertie smiled in spite of the serious aspect of the affair.

"After all, while we concede that Mercedes has been abducted in spite of our efforts to save her, I

believe there is something about this matter which we don't exactly understand."

"Well, we will understand it, if it's possible. You're still with me?"

"Certainly."

"What would you advise?"

"First, an examination of the surroundings here. From where I sit I can see the marks of two moccasined feet."

"An' thar's the prints of two more."

A closer examination convinced the two friends that two different persons made the marks.

"Mercedes and her mother," said Bertie, astutely.

"I see nothing to lead us to believe that Raton was here," put in Lerue, gloomily.

"The trails lead off to that rocky shale," returned the youth, "and there we lose it entirely. The next thing for us to do is to follow the finger of that bark signboard—on to the Mesa Encatada!"

Little time was lost in starting for their destination.

They had covered less than a mile when they broke suddenly around the spur of a mountain and found themselves in the center of a group of men congregated about a "water hole," as the tanks in the desert are called.

"Halt!" cried a gray-whiskered man, springing to his feet and grabbing up a Winchester as he did so.

The rest of the men also threw themselves on the alert, and prepared to make use of their weapons in case it should prove necessary.

Bertie and his companion instantly pulled up their horses in response to this emphatic summons.

"Who are you?" asked the youth, casting a curious glance into the faces of the men about him.

"We're man-hunters and it strikes me that you may be the men we're hunting for. Hands up!"

But Bertie did not throw up his hands.

He knew very well that there was some mistake, as these men had not the appearance of being ruffians and cutthroats, consequently they could not belong to Raton's gang.

"Don't be foolish," said our hero, deliberately.

"It strikes me that you're the one who is foolish, stranger," returned the gray-bearded man.

"Who are you hunting?"

"We're hunting for the population of the town of Terrible."

"I thought so. Have you any idea where Terrible is?"

"No."

"Do we look as though we lived in the town?"

"Well, I can't say as you do."

"I assure you that we do not, but that we want to find Raton as badly as you do."

"What's your name, friend?"

"My name's Bertie Wade."

"Sometimes called Diamond Dick, Jr.?"

"Exactly."

"Then give me your fin," cried the gray-bearded man, reaching forward and catching Bertie's hand. "I've been for fifty years on the frontier, and I can appreciate the work you've been doing. I'm Chris Conover, of Albuquerque, and deuced glad to meet you."

"My friend, Sam Lerue," said Bertie, highly gratified at the ease with which he and his friend had slipped out of what might have been a serious difficulty.

Conover and Lerue shook hands.

"What the blazes are all you fellers doin' out yere?" asked Lerue.

"We're all detectives, every man of us. We've been congregating at Winslow for the past ten days. You see, every one of us is after some criminal or other whom we have traced this far. I'm after a murderer; Lukens, there, is on the trail of a forger, and Raymond, here at my elbow, is a secret-service man and tracking a counterfeiter. And that's the way with all of us. Coming together at Winslow, we joined forces, and we're going to find this town of Terrible and depopulate it."

"If we can," supplemented Lukens.

"We've been looking for it for a week," said Raymond, "and haven't found a trace of it."

"Then it's a lucky thing all around," returned Bertie, "that Lerue and I happened to stumble upon you."

"Do you know where Terrible is?"

"We can lead you directly to it."

"Glory!" shouted Conover. "Can you start for the place at once?"

"Yes."

"Mount your horses, boys," commanded Conover, turning to the detectives. "We're having a great run of luck, and if we don't make Rome howl in mighty short order I'll miss my guess."

Ten minutes later the detectives, some ten in number, were cantering off across the plain under the leadership of Diamond Dick, Jr., and Lerue.

The two latter rode side by side.

"Thar'd be a purty how-d'-ye-do if it so happened that 'ar town wasn't on top o' that mesa, pard," remarked Lerue.

"Don't worry," said Bertie. "I'll stake my pile that we find the town without any trouble."

"I hope so," replied the cowboy, with a doubtful shake of his head.

Just then Chris Conover rode up alongside.

"Have ye any idea, Diamond Dick, Jr., how much that town of Terrible is worth to this band of man-hunters?" he asked.

"No."

"Just one hundred and twenty-eight thousand, cold."

"In what way?"

"That's what the rewards figure up."

"Rather a wealthy town," laughed Bertie.

For a couple of hours they rode on, chatting together, and at last, just as it began to grow dusk, they came within sight of the "Haunted Mesa."

It was as though an acre or so of ground had been lifted evenly for several hundred feet above the level of the surrounding plain.

The walls were precipitous and rocky, and seemed practically unscalable.

"And you say that the town of Terrible is located on top of that rock, do you, Diamond Dick, Jr.?"

"I'll gamble on it."

"Then those outlaws must have wings in order to get up to it, for I can see no possible way of riding, or walking or climbing to the top."

"There is a way," returned Bertie, quietly.

"Then let's hunt for it."

"Not now; we will do our hunting after dark."

The band of man-hunters came to camp in a small arroyo, where it was possible to secure enough water and feed for their horses.

Haversacks had been heavily loaded at Winslow, and Lerue and Bertie were supplied with a hearty meal through the hospitality of Conover.

After the meal they waited for the night to grow dark enough so that they could begin their investigations.

"Look thar!" whispered Lerue, clutching Bertie by the shoulder and pointing up at the top of the Mesa Encatada.

Bertie's eyes were sharp, and he was able to see a ring of fire waving at the edge of the elevated plateau.

The attention of Conover and the rest of the detectives was called to the fact.

"What is it?" asked Conover.

"I can tell ye durn quick," said Lerue; "it's sperits, that's what it is. The mesa is haunted!"

"Nonsense!" broke in Bertie; "there's human agency behind that ring of fire. It proves to me that the Mesa Encatada is inhabited. If there are people up there, of course there must be a way to get up, and if there is a track to the summit we ought to be able to follow it."

"I agree with you," said Conover.

"Who d'ye think makes that signal?" queried Lerue.

Bertie's answer was quick and to the point.

"Mercedes."

"Mercedes?"

"Certainly; who else? That ring of fire is for our guidance. If I am not very much mistaken, a trail to the top will be found at about the place where we see that light."

"They wouldn't let her signal us in that fashion."

"She's sharp enough to elude them."

"Look thar! By thunder, that ring of fire is rollin' down the side of the cliff."

"Exactly!" returned Bertie; "it is rolling down the path we are to follow. Watch it! watch it with all your eyes!"

The hoop rolled down the precipitous side of the cliff, increasing in speed until it seemed like a flash of lightning.

Then, suddenly, it vanished.

The antics of this circle of fire had been watched with breathless interest by all of the detectives.

"What's to be done now?" queried Conover.

"Let's make for the particular point on the side of the cliff where we last saw that hoop of flame."

"Shall we take our horses?"

"No; leave them here. They would be useless."

Silently, one by one, the little band of man-hunters started across the plain toward the Mesa Encatada.

They were about to begin their attack on the town of Terrible.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HOOP OF FIRE.

After Mercedes left her lover and Diamond Dick, Jr., she made her way directly in the direction of the smoke rings.

Between her and the point for which she was making lay a small arroyo.

As she plunged into this arroyo her mother stepped out from among the greasewood bushes and soapweed.

"Stop, Mercedes!"

She spoke in Spanish, and, simultaneously with the words, she raised her hand.

"What is it, mother?" asked the girl, making use of the same language, which might be called her native tongue, since she had used it ever since she was a child.

"Our plot for vengeance works well," went on the priestess. "The 'Mouse' is yonder, where the smoke rings are."

A fierce exultation leaped from the girl's eyes.

"You arranged it, then, so that he would overhear your design to send up the smoke rings and so bring me to your side?" she asked.

"Yes; I told it over to one of the men in such a way that the 'Mouse' could overhear without being seen." The priestess laughed. "He gave me a sleeping potion and believes that I am now unconscious of all he is doing."

"His revolvers——"

"They will not harm you."

"He is there alone?"

"Yes. He thinks himself equal to the task of carrying you away. Have courage, novia, and you will win."

"Never fear but I shall have courage. But Lerue and Diamond Dick, Jr.—I promised that I would return to them in two hours."

"I will go to them and set their minds at rest."

"You have a horse?"

"Carramba! You do not think I could come this distance without one? I am getting old, Mercedes, and my aged limbs could not bring me the distance. Yet, although I am old, my heart is full of fire, and if we can but secure vengeance against this desperado, I should die happy!"

"We shall have vengeance," said the girl.

"Then ride on, mujercita! the hound may tire of waiting."

"Adios!"

The girl continued on across the arroyo, mounted the mesa and made for the cluster of palo verde.

As she drew near and halted her horse at the base of the cottonwood, Raton rode out of the brush.

An evil smile burned on his face and he spurred to the girl's side and caught her bridle bits.

"So ye little spit-fire," said he, with a hoarse laugh, "I've fooled ye, have I? Thought ye was comin' ter see yer ma, an' she ain't here. Didn't expect to see me, I'll gamble."

"Release that bridle," commanded Mercedes, sharply.

"Don't ye go fer ter git riled, my little gum drop, kase it won't be purty! Think I'm goin' ter let ye gi' me the slip arter I've caught ye?"

"Take your hand away!"

There was no mistaking the girl's meaning. In some way, a little, silver-mounted revolver had found its way into her hands and she drew a bead on Raton's heart.

The desperado looked into her flashing eyes.

Would she dare shoot?

For a moment he hesitated, and then—his hand dropped and the bits were released.

"Cuss me," he growled, with something like admiration in his voice, "if you ain't about the gamiest little squaw in the hull Moqui layout. It's kase I like ye that I'm lettin' go of that bridle, an' not fer any fear of that little popgun."

The girl's lip curled in a sarcastic smile.

"You speak," said she, "as though you thought I did not expect to find you here?"

Again Raton gave vent to his hoarse, chuckling laugh.

"An' no more ye did, ye minx! I was too cunnin' fer yer ma!"

"Where do you think my mother is?"

"Fast asleep in the pueblo. I was the one who made the smoke rings."

"My mother is not asleep in the pueblo. I have not been fooled and neither has she. You are the dupe."

"Me? Ye're crazy!"

"I brought you here to meet me for a purpose."

"What purpose is that?"

"I want to have a talk with you."

"Say, Mercedes, are ye goin' ter tell me that ye like me a little bit, an' that ye want me fer——"

"Stop!" cried the girl, angrily. "I hate you! Always remember that."

A black frown overspread the outlaw's face.

"It's that cussed Sam Lerue——"

"Not a word about him, or I will put a bullet

through your black heart. You know me. You know that my heart has the courage and my hand the skill."

"What d'ye want ter see me fer?" was the sulky query.

"I want to tell you that I know what your base designs are."

"Designs? I haven't got any base designs."

"Raton, you lie!"

The words came quick and sharp.

For an instant there was silence, and then Raton smiled grimly.

"It's easy enough ter call a man a liar, gal, but I consider whar it comes from."

"Then you don't want to abduct me so that I cannot be a witness in the Peralta-Reavis case?"

Mercedes spoke rapidly, for she was still speaking in the Spanish tongue, and not in the halting English.

Raton understood this language well.

It had been bred into him from his very youth.

"The devil!" cried the outlaw, evidencing a surprise that was far from feigned; "how did you find that out?"

"You are to secure five thousand dollars for your work. Is it not so?"

"Yes; but how the blazes did you find it out? That's what bothers me."

"It is immaterial how I found it out. Suffice to say I know all about it. Where were you going to take me?"

"To the Haunted Mesa—— Dash it all! I mean to the town of Terrible. I'll take ye thar yet, if ye'd like to go with me."

"I will go with you—on one consideration."

A triumphant light leaped from the outlaw's eyes.

"What's the consideration?" he asked.

"That you give me half of the five thousand."

In his surprise, Raton nearly fell out of his saddle.

"Then ye're willin' ter go if I divide with ye?"

"Yes."

"An ye won't go if I don't?"

"No."

"Looky yere, ye minx! I want all that five thousand—every cent of it, kase it don't all come to me, d'ye see? Some of it goes to some of the other boys. I can't give ye any of it."

"Then I go back to the pueblo."

As she spoke she started to turn her horse.

"Wait, Mercedes!"

She looked back and saw that Raton had drawn a large, wicked-looking revolver.

"I don't want to shoot ye, gal, but I'll be durned if I'm goin' ter let ye git away from me now."

"You would kill me, would you?" she asked, calmly.

"No, I don't want ter shoot; I jest want ter skeer ye, that's all."

"Well, you can't scare me. I shall not accompany you to the town of Terrible unless you pay me half that money."

She struck her horse with the quirt and he bounded away.

"Are ye goin' ter stop?" shouted Raton.

"No!"

He spurred his horse into a gallop and took after her.

Her horse, however, was swifter than his, and at last, in sheer desperation, the outlaw sighted his revolver upon the girl's fleeing form and pulled the trigger.

There was no report.

The hammer clicked down upon an empty cylinder.

Again he pulled the trigger, with a like result.

Muttering an imprecation, he pulled the trigger rapidly until every chamber in the cylinder had been tried.

All the chambers were empty.

Dropping the revolver into his belt, he drew another.

This proved equally useless.

"The guns have been tampered with," he gritted, "but I've got somethin' else here that will do at close range, an' I'll keep on that gal's track till I run her down. Her hoss has got the speed, but mine has the bottom!"

Drawing a knife and holding it in his hand ready for use in case it should be needed, Raton settled down in his saddle to what he thought was destined to be a long, hard chase.

But he was mistaken.

Pulling up her horse abruptly, Mercedes turned the animal squarely about.

She held her glittering little six-shooter in her hand.

"Come within ten feet of me," she cried, in ringing tones, "and I fire!"

Raton was going to take no chances and heeded her command.

"You called this a pea-shooter a moment ago," went on Mercedes, "but I warn you to beware lest you force me to use it. You have found out by this time that your revolvers have been tampered with. You are at my mercy."

The outlaw realized the force of the girl's last remark very fully. He had tried to play a brace game and had failed. His usual tactics had proven of no avail.

"Come, come, Mercedes," he said, laughingly, "I was only joshin' with ye. Is it possible that you think I could raise a hand ag'in ye?"

"Yes," said she, "it's possible. I know you would, if I were not too sharp for you."

"Ye won't go to the town of Terrible unless I promise to give ye half the stuff I git?"

"That's what I want."

"Well, I'll give it to ye. So come along, now, an' quit yer tantrums."

"Ride on," said the girl, "I'll join you inside of fifteen minutes."

"Ride on? While I do that ye'll gi' me the slip."

"You could do nothing to prevent me from doing that, if I wished to. Will you ride on or shall I continue my course toward the pueblo?"

"I'll ride on, o' course," replied the outlaw.

Suiting his action to the word, he wheeled his horse and started off at a gallop.

Mercedes followed more leisurely.

At the cottonwood, safe from the sight of Raton, she took her dirk, peeled off the piece of bark, wrote the two words—"Mesa Encatada"—pinned it to the stem of the tree, and then rode off to join the outlaw.

He was waiting for her.

"Ride ahead!" she commanded. "Remember this—I am not your prisoner and refuse to be treated as such."

He demurred somewhat, but as she held the whip-hand he was compelled to follow out her wishes in the matter.

It was in this way that they made the journey to the Haunted Mesa, neither speaking, but each watching the other with the eyes of a hawk.

As they drew near the precipitous sides of the hill, Raton made his way to a certain spot, placed his fingers to his lips and gave vent to a shrill whistle.

Almost instantaneously a heavy rock rolled away from the base of the cliff, disclosing a cavernous hole in the side of the hill.

A shaft of daylight penetrated this cavern from above, making the interior easily discernible.

Mercedes saw that there were at least a dozen horses in the place, all tied in stalls and munching hay or grain.

Saddles and riding paraphernalia were strewn about the place.

"How are ye, Raton?" spoke the one man to be seen in the cavern.

"Well enough," replied the outlaw. "How is everythin'?"

"Quiet."

"Has Buford got back?"

"Naw."

"Well, he will be here soon. Watch for him."

Raton turned to Mercedes.

"Yere's whar we dismount, gal. Our hosses kain't go no further."

They both got off their animals and the man who had opened the cavern to them took the horses in charge.

"This way," said Raton.

He led the way toward the side of the chamber, and then began a precipitous ascent which no one but an athlete could have accomplished successfully.

Mercedes' wounded arm bothered her very little, and, as she was strong of limb and quick of eye, she had not the slightest difficulty in following the outlaw.

At last the upward climb was finished, and they stood on the very top of the Haunted Mesa.

The plateau was as flat as a table top.

Several adobe houses were visible, and from one of them came the tinkling strains of a guitar, accompanied by loud voices.

Before reaching this particular house, which was large, Raton stopped at the door of a smaller adobe.

"Yere's whar ye kin hang out," he said, with a cunning leer. "Ye said, a while ago, that ye wasn't my prisoner. Ye are, now. I'd like ter see ye leave this Mesa without my consent. An' as fer gitting twenty-five hundred of that five thousand, I'll fool ye. Ye won't see a red of that money."

He gave vent to another of his disagreeable laughs and went away.

The handsome half-caste looked after him, and a smile of disdain curled her lip.

"His prisoner!" she said, under her breath, in the language of the Moquis. "He is still the dupe."

Raton had not bound her hands—it would have been a livelier occupation for him than his recent rattlesnake experience, had he tried it.

Neither had he secured the door of the adobe—in truth, it had no door.

Mercedes was free to remain there or go out, as she chose, and she chose the latter.

After taking a swift survey of the interior of the adobe and finding that it contained nothing but a stool and a bed on the floor, she passed out.

The houses mentioned were clustered on the mesa top near its center, and, of course, could not be seen from the surrounding plain, owing to the height of the place.

The moment Mercedes emerged from the adobe she saw a man approaching that house.

She stopped.

"You want to see me?" she asked, in Spanish.

By the looks of the fellow, she took him to be a Mexican. She was not mistaken.

He had not seen her before she spoke, and he stopped short with a look of admiration that he could not disguise.

"Angelico!" the fellow ejaculated. "You must be an angel, since the only way you could get here was my coming down. What man would not want to see you?"

She smiled at his flattery.

That he was no common ruffian, like the rest, she knew at once.

"Your answer proves that I was mistaken," she rejoined. "And now that you have seen me, I will pass on."

"Now that I have seen you," he repeated, "I must warn you. I know not who you are, or how you came here, but you must not go nearer to the edge of the mesa than yonder line."

"Why not?"

"It is the rule; you might be seen from the plain."

"Ah! that is it, eh? I see. And now who are you, that you thus warn me?"

"For the moment I am the camp guard. It is my duty to see that no one breaks any of the rules. We have no fear of interlopers here."

"Yet here am I."

"An angel."

"You know better, and I hate flattery. I had rather talk business, if you do not object."

"I will talk anything, so long as I may talk with you."

"All right. In the first place, what are you doing here? You are not one of El Raton's men?"

"For the time being, yes."

"And for the other part of the time?"

"Before answering that I must know who you are."

"I told you your words were flattery—that it was merely a compliment when you called me an angel. I am Mercedes of the Moquis."

"Ah-ha! I have heard of you. Then El Raton is here. He has captured you and you are his prisoner. He swore he would have you, and that he would kill your lover."

"I am his prisoner, yes. I came here for a purpose and would now escape."

"And I don't see how you are going to do that, pretty one."

"To do so I must have help. At what time will you be guard of the camp again?"

"Two hours after dark, for two hours."

"Then listen: I hate El Raton; I must escape from his power; the man who rescues me out of his hands shall have my love. When you get off duty, by some means smuggle into my house the materials for a fire signal—I would make a hoop of fire."

At that moment louder voices were heard, and the Mexican gave a hurried salute and walked away.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BIRD IN THE CAGE.

Meantime, when El Raton entered the largest of the adobe houses the playing and singing had stopped instantly.

About a score of men, of all types of villainy, greeted his coming with a shout.

"El Raton!"

"And where have you been so long?"

"Looks as if he had been spending a week in the suburbs of Hades!"

This coarse remark raised a laugh, and El Raton's sinister face grew darker than ever.

"I have been there, or as near to it as I ever want to go again," he growled. "But I have come off best, and that makes it all right."

"But what's the matter?" one fellow asked. "What's that scar on your neck? What's the matter with your eyes?"

"That scar is a rattlesnake bite, that is all. Got any likker handy? Ha! that will just fix me out. As for my eyes, wait a minute."

For some moments he gave all his attention to a bottle that had been handed him.

"There, that will do for all the rattlesnake juice I happen to have in me," he said, wiping his mouth

on the back of his hand. "And now you want to know that is the matter with my eyes?"

"Yes, yes."

His eyes were both slightly discolored, and looked as if they had been burned.

"Well, Diamond Dick, Jr., is the matter with them."

"What!"

"That infernal young detective?"

"The same."

"Where is he?"

"Not a thousand miles away from here, I'm glad to say."

"Glad to say——"

"Yes, for I mean to see his heart before another forty-eight hours go over my head!"

The threat was a terrible one, and it was made in a manner that was calculated to strike terror to a timid hearer.

"Tell us about it."

"I hold the winning hand, and he is the only trump that is out against me. I will trick him with a joker before the hand is out, see if I don't."

"But, tell us about it, Raton."

"Yes, for I need your help, or some of you, at any rate."

"And you shall have it!" they vociferated, loudly.

"We have all got an iron in the fire for that cuss!"

"Well, hyer is what's happened: Ye see, Nick and me put up a job to do him, but he hain't done yet. The fact of the business is we got done ourselves, cuss him!"

"Oh! he is a cyclone, is that chap."

"We made him a prisoner and took him to the Moqui pueblo. The snake dance was on, and I took part in that infernal proceeding in order to get in a lick at him. I filled my skin with the antidote, of course, and then I went into the corral and got out two of the biggest rattlers of the lot—that mark on my neck shows for their size, and I can show half a dozen more."

"Well, I danced a little while, till I had got the reptiles well in hand, and then I got near to Diamond Dick, Jr., and let them fly straight at him."

"And you say he is alive!"

"As much alive as you are. Why, he jest snapped out a couple of blacksnake whips—though where he got them from I don't know, and each of them big rattlers was caught on the fly, and cut in two as if you had done it with a knife!"

Exclamations of surprise were heard on every hand.

"That chap bears a charmed life," declared one Jim Keegan.

"And it is our business to break the charm," declared the boss of the town of Terrible.

"But, how?"

"Like ye cook a rabbit," said another.

"First catch the rabbit, eh?"

"That's right."

"And we'll get him, you bet we will!" cried El Raton. "That is the business of this town at present. And then we'll attend to the cooking part of the game."

"We'll make it a jubilee."

"You bet."

"But you said you came out on top, El Raton. It don't look much like it."

"Don't it?"

"No."

"Well, I did all the same."

"How?"

"You have heard me speak about Mercedes, the Moquis queen?"

"That gal you are dead gone on, and have been swearing you would bring here and marry?"

"The same."

"But where does Nick Buford come in?"

"We'll have to settle that between us, and I guess he will yield his claim all right."

"But what about the gal?"

"I have got her here, and I want you to drink to her health."

"Hooray! Good fer you, El Raton! You are on top of the pile yet, you bet you are!"

There was an uproar for a few minutes, and the bottle went the round of the band of cutthroats to celebrate the occasion.

"Yes, I have got her, and not only that, but I am makin' a fine thing out of it besides," Raton went on. "I get five thousand dollars for the job to boot."

"Whew!"

"Say you ain't strictly in it?"

They passed the bottle again, to do full justice to the event.

"Where is she?" demanded Keegan.

"In my adobe," answered El Raton. "Come on, and I will introduce ye to her, boys."

With a shout they were on their feet instantly, and this was what startled Mercedes and the Mexican with whom she was talking at the moment.

The Mexican had gone but a few steps when El Raton and his gang of ruffians appeared.

The half-caste had withdrawn into the hut.

"Right this way, my cherubs," she heard El Raton saying, "and see if you don't say I have got good taste. I tell you she is the pink of these hyer plains, 'ceptin' none!"

In another moment his form darkened the door of the adobe in which Mercedes had been left.

"Where are ye, beaut?" Raton called out.

"You mean me?" asked the girl.

"Most 'suredly I do. Come out hyer and show yerself, and let me introduce ye to the boys."

He stepped back and Mercedes appeared in the doorway.

Ejaculations of admiration were instantly heard,

and Jim Keegan, for one, envied the boss of the town of Terrible.

In her hand the girl held her little defender, and she ran her eyes over the motley crew as if she might be debating in mind which one she would pepper first.

"Boys," said El Raton, with a wave of the hand, "I low me to introduce to you the queen of the town of Terrible. She has come to stay and purty soon we will have a weddin' that will do ye all proud."

The girl's dark face slightly paled as she heard this.

"It will take two to make that kind of a bargain, El Raton," she declared, fearlessly.

"Not in this hyer case," declared Raton, with a light laugh. "I am speakin' for you as well as myself."

"You had better go slow."

"Oh! thar's plenty of time; a day or two more or less won't matter, seein' that ye have got to stay here five months anyhow, even ef that was all of the scheme."

"What do you mean?"

"I am talkin' about that five thousand."

"What about it?"

"It is to be paid at the rate of a thousand a month, for your detention hyer."

"Then you deceived me."

"I guess not."

"I thought you were to have the money in hand at once."

"No, I never said so. And then let you go next day? That would be a big plan, now wouldn't it? Ha, ha, ha!"

"And you do not mean to keep your word with me?"

"What word?"

"That I am to have half of that money?"

"I never made any such promise as that. But, bless ye, what is mine is yours, for you are to be mine."

"Never!"

The weapon in her hand came up a little.

"Look out, boys!" said El Raton, warningly. "The little spitfire might let drive. There is a fang that has got to be pulled before she will be perfectly harmless."

"Let me see you undertake to pull it!" said the girl, defiantly.

"You will, later."

They were about turning away when the Mexican on guard came along again, slowly pacing his beat.

"Here, Rivero," said El Raton, "you are the man I want to see. You have an honored prisoner here to give a little attention to. She is soon to be the queen of Terrible."

"Si, senor," said the Mexican, with a bow.

"You must see that she does not go over the line, that no smoke is allowed to be made by her, and that

she does not go down to the entrance. Do you understand?"

"Si, senor."

"All right. Mercedes, this is Don Manuel Rivero, who enjoys the distinction of being one of the greatest forgers Mexico ever produced. He is——"

"Car-r-r——" the Mexican's tongue began to trill.

"Hold on, don't swear in the presence of a lady," checked El Raton. "You might as well have all the honor due you, and it is perfectly safe to mention it to her, seeing that she is here to stay."

"Cascaras! She will never leave here when I am on duty," declared Rivero.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed El Raton. "I thought I could insure that by just mentioning who and what you are. I'll give the other guardsmen the same distinction, when each in his turn goes on duty. Ha, ha, ha! I am boss of this town of Terrible!"

With that he walked away.

The Mexican muttered something under his breath, but he gave Mercedes a glance that she understood.

Jim Keegan had a dark look on his face, and scowled upon El Raton as he, with the others, followed him in the direction of the adobe house from which they had come.

CHAPTER VIII.

MATTERS GETTING TWISTED.

That El Raton was indeed "boss of the town of Terrible" seemed positive.

At the moment they were about to enter the largest of the adobe houses, a sharp, shrill whistle was heard.

El Raton stopped and turned.

"It must be Nick Buford," he said.

"His is the only party out," reminded Keegan.

"Yas, that's so."

They waited.

In a few minutes Nick Buford appeared on top of the mesa.

After him came two more of El Raton's band of cutthroats, who had been out with Buford.

One glance at Buford's face told El Raton that something was amiss, and he started to meet him, eagerly demanding:

"What's in the wind, Nick?"

"Et ain't in the wind, boss," was the response.

"Et is out thar in one of them 'ar arroyos."

"What is it, I demand."

"Nothin' but Chris Conover and Diamond Dick, Jr., with a full hand of detectives to back 'em."

"Vindicta! You speak the truth?"

"Do ye think I would lie about et?"

"Well, no; but how did they discover——"

"I ain't sayin' that they have discovered anything, but thar they be as big as life."

"They have made a discovery, if they are thar,"

grated El Raton. "It is the doings of that accursed Diamond Dick, Jr."

"Then he must have trailed you hyer."

"Impossible."

"Nothin' impossible fer that cuss."

"There is one thing that will be impossible, though."

"What is that?"

"It will be impossible for him to get out of our hands, once we get him here."

"You mean to tackle him again?"

"You bet!"

"Hadn't we better cut loose and get over into Mex. as soon as possible?"

"Not by a hatful! This is the safest retreat we ever had, and there is one way of keepin' the secret, even yet."

"How is et to be done?"

"By extarminatin' thar hull shootin' match."

"That's all right, but how are ye goin' about et?"

"Why, we'll lure 'em into this stronghold, of course, and that will end the game."

"Eureka!"

"Zorro! you have brought us a good piece of news," cried El Raton, in a burst of enthusiasm.

"There is only one thing to be sure of."

"What's that?"

"Did they see you?"

"Nit."

"Then we have got the hull thing in our hands, and if we don't make somebody sick and sorry it will not be our fault."

"You bet. But what about Mercedes?"

"Oh! I have got her all right," said Raton.

"Where is she?"

"Thar in my coop."

"In your coop!"

"Yes, I have moved out fer the time bein'. Ye see, I didn't know whether you had yours ready fer a bride or not," he cunningly turned it off.

"Oh," said Buford, greatly mollified. "I didn't know but you meant to deal crooked."

"No, she is thar, waitin' fer ye. Go and see her, if you like. But come with me first."

He led the way into the biggest of the adobes.

"We have got to make doubly sure of this game, Nick," he went on, when they had taken seats. "I want you to play a big role in et."

"What is et to be?"

"Whar is your rival, Lerue?"

"Out thar with the rest."

"I thought so. I am goin' to give you a chance to settle with him."

"Ha! that will suit me to death. I will settle fer him, too, you kin bet your hat."

"Yes, I was sure that would please you. Now, here is my plan: We must lure them into the trap, and you must see that they are all in."

"How?"

"By bein' outside when they come in."

"All right, I understand. I'll see that thar don't none git away."

"That is the idea, pat. Then when we get the signal from you that we have got 'em all, the ruction will commence."

"I see."

"And it will be one of the biggest mysteries this country ever had in all its history to account for those missin' men."

"You bet!"

"That's all fer the time bein', then."

"All right, then I'll go and buzz the ear of that little gal fer a while."

"Yes, go," said El Raton, under his breath, as the fellow left him, "for it is likely to be your sole opportunity. I'll see that you are picked off in the melee."

And he meant it.

Buford went to the adobe where the girl was, and as El Raton looked after him he muttered further:

"Yes, make much of your time, my pretty fellow. I trust the gal to take care of herself with her gun. I will let you remove Sam Lerue, and then when I have done the same thing for you I'll have it all to myself."

Buford found Mercedes there, and she was on her feet to greet him, her gun in hand.

She had heard him coming.

"Ah-ha!" he cried, joyously, at the sight of her. "Give us a kiss, my dear!"

"I'll give you this!" she cried, leveling her weapon at his head.

"You wouldn't shoot me!"

"I give you just ten seconds to get out of that doorway. One, two, three, four——"

She was counting them off rapidly, and Buford saw by the way she squinted over the tube of the little gun that she meant "shoot."

He jumped back and out of sight.

"That's durn rough, that is," he complained. "I didn't know you had that thing. Can't ye treat yer lover no better than that?"

"If you do not get away from here at once I will lay you out."

"All right, I'll see you later."

She heard him move away.

Yet it struck her as strange that he would give up so easily.

Going quietly to the door, she looked out, and as she did so she felt something cold touch her neck.

"Don't ye move!" cried Buford's voice. "Ef ye do, I'll have to do ye damage, much as I like ye. Now I'll come in fer that chat with ye, whether ye like et or not."

He had merely gone around the hut and was ready for her when she appeared.

She had fallen into his net.

While speaking, he had grabbed her pistol hand,

and that done he put his own weapon back into his belt and forced her into the adobe.

"Now, my pretty," he cried, taking her on his lap, and sitting down on the only seat the hut afforded, "I'll take et out in kisses. Thar is one to begin with, an' how d'ye like ther flavor—— Thunder!"

He dropped the girl, and was on his feet instantly.

The doorway had darkened, and there stood Manuel Rivero, with his Winchester leveled at him.

And in almost the same moment a big five-shooter also came into the range of his vision, in a bigger fist, and its tube was pressed under the ear of the Mexican who held the rifle.

What did it mean?

The thought flashed through Buford's mind quickly.

More than that, he had neglected to take the pistol away from the girl—had merely held her hand, and now he felt the tube of that weapon in his ear.

It all took place in a space of two seconds.

Instantly following the appearance of the hand with the big revolver, came the face of El Raton.

And in the same second, almost, came the visage of Jim Keegan, to darken the doorway further.

He, too, had a gun in his hand ready for business.

"Don't anybody shoot," the half-caste was quick to caution. "I have got this chap right, and there is no need of it."

And verily she had, with that toy in his ear.

"What does this mean?" demanded Raton.

He addressed Rivero.

"I saw him seize the lady and ran to her aid," was the answer.

"You did?"

"Yes."

"What was it to you, if he had seized her?"

"Milagro! was it nothing to you? What would you have me do, being on guard?"

With a shrug, the Mexican wheeled and walked away, for the time being having eluded the suspicion of the boss of Terrible.

"And you?"

El Raton turned furiously upon Jim Keegan.

"Why, durn et, I followed you," was the response. "Say, what is bitin' you, anyhow?"

"That's all right, ef it is so," growled El Raton. "And now fer you, Nick Buford, what did you mean?"

"What did I mean?" repeated the fellow in the three-cornered fix—he being the apex where three weapons were at the moment centering.

"That's what I said," cried Raton.

"Why, I meant to git that gun, that's what, and played a trick to do et. Et seems to me you are takin' a mighty interest in property that don't belong to ye, boss."

"It does, eh?"

"Yes, et does; and not only you, but Rivero and Keegan hyer."

The boss of Terrible saw that he would have to say something that would smooth out Buford's suspicions, if he expected to get any service out of him in the pending crisis.

"Well, et ought to be as plain as the nose on your face where my interest is," he said. "I have got five thousand dollars interest in her, and I must see to et that no harm comes to her before I git my clutch on the goods. See?"

"Wull, who was goin' to harm her."

"I meant to see that nobody did, that was all. Come, Nick, no need our quarreling over et."

"No, I opine not, but I be durn ef I like to leave her with this hyer popper in her possession. No tellin' what harm she may do somebody with et ef we do."

"And you will all see what harm will be done, if you do not get out of here in a hurry," now cried the half-caste, taking the plug out of Buford's ear and stepping back and covering them all. "I have got a dose of pills here for somebody."

She spoke in a way that showed that she meant it, and they tumbled out of her presence with haste.

CHAPTER IX.

SURPRISE OF SURPRISES.

There was no further incident worthy of mention on the mesa the remainder of the afternoon.

Mercedes remained in her hut most of the time, where she was supplied with water and some coarse bread and smoke-dried meat.

Just as it was growing dark something came into the adobe house with a slight thud on the ground, and she made haste to see what it was, finding it was what she had waited for.

It was the material for her signal fire, or fire wheel.

An Indian maid, or at any rate, having Indian blood in her veins, and having lived all her life in an Indian pueblo, she was versed in all their arts, if arts will apply.

She set about her task immediately.

By the time it was thoroughly dark it was done.

She had worked in darkness, but her fingers were thoroughly familiar with the work.

Just as she finished, there was a presence in the doorway.

"Are you here?" was whispered in Spanish.

"Yes, I am here," was the response.

"Then now is your chance. Whom would you signal?"

"My people."

"For what purpose?"

"That they may rescue me."

"Is that all?"

"And that they may punish my captors."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"What of me?"

"You can escape with me."

"You mean it?"

"Certainly I mean it."

"Very well, it is a bargain."

"Is the coast all clear that way?"

"Yes, and now is your chance. Wait one minute till I get away."

"All right."

"Then I will give you about a minute to wave your signal before I will discover you."

"That will be sufficient."

"Then act now, while the gang are at their mess."

"Si, senor."

The Mexican passed on, and the girl slipped out of the hut.

She hastened to the edge of the mesa, or as near it as she dared to approach for fear of losing her footing.

There she lighted a match and applied it to her hoop, and in two or three seconds it was a hoop of living fire, and she twirled it rapidly around and around.

"Now, mi madre," she said, in a half whisper, "you know where I am. I know your eyes never tire when you watch for a sign. Here it is; you know where I am; you know that all is well or the signal would not be thus. Now, then, do you your part!"

Of a sudden came a shout.

It was from the direction of the cluster of adobe houses.

With a cry, the half-caste dropped the hoop of fire, and it went on a spin down the side of the mesa.

"Zamacuco! What do you there?"

It was the voice of the guard.

Instantly the girl left the spot, making a detour in the direction of her hut.

"What is the matter?" called the voice of El Raton.

"A fire! A signal!"

"Where?"

"It was there, at the edge of the mesa."

"Fool! Why did you not shoot?"

"I thought to capture the idiot who was making it."

"Spread out, men, and we will have him," cried Raton.

"We have a traitor in camp!"

The whole evil crew of them was out now, and they ran this way and that, excitedly. But no one was to be seen.

It was dark, save for the stars and the faint light that came from some of the adobes.

Meantime, Mercedes was making haste to her hut.

As she entered, a strong arm seized her, and a hand was clapped over her mouth.

"Not a word, not a sound," was hissed into her

ear, "or I will hurl you over the edge to the plain below!"

She struggled, but was powerless in the strong grasp of her captor.

Her arms were pinned to her sides.

Straight away in the opposite direction from where the band had gathered, her captor hastened.

Of a sudden there was a collision, with muttered oaths from two men, and they all went down in a heap on the ground, and Mercedes was for the instant freed.

She was up like a flash, and off in another direction, while the two men fought.

Barely ten strides had she taken, when she was seized again.

Now, however, she had her weapon in hand.

She fired.

There was an oath, and for a second the hold was relaxed, but it instantly tightened again and she was borne away.

At the sound of the shot, a shout arose among the evil denizens of the town of Terrible, and they all came running in the direction whence the report had reached their ears.

The first to arrive stumbled over the two men fighting on the ground.

"What is this?" thundered El Raton.

"A traitor!" cried the voice of Buford.

"Liar!" was the panted exclamation from the other man. "You are the traitor!"

They fought like tigers, and it required the efforts of five or six men to separate them. While this was being done, El Raton had run to the biggest of the huts and grabbed up a lantern that stood in a corner lighted.

With this he ran again to the scene.

Just as he arrived the men had been separated, and they stood panting and glaring at each other.

"What is it, Buford?" demanded the boss of the place.

"Mercedes—he was carrying her off in his arms," was the panted explanation.

"Hound!" cried El Raton. "Where is she now?"

"She ran off."

"Which way?"

"I don't know."

"So you are the traitor, are you?" to Keegan, for it was he with whom Buford had been having the bout.

"No, he lies," was the snorted rejoinder. "He had the girl, and I made him drop her. If there is a traitor to you here, he is the man. He meant to steal your queen."

"You are a liar!"

At that instant came a sharp, shrill whistle.

"Hist! What was that?"

"The signal."

"But no one is out."

"It must be the girl."

"No, she could not get out—she could not even get down from here in the dark, knowing none of our secrets."

"Then it is Chris Conover, with his gang," said Buford.

"And you, curse you, are here and not outside where you should be. How can you get out now?"

"They are here earlier than we looked for them."

"Yes, in answer to that signal."

"And who waved the signal?"

"Who, but the girl!"

Again came the whistle signal, and this time it was imperative.

This time, however, it came from the interior of the Haunted Mesa, and not from the plain outside, as it had sounded at first.

"Come! we are wanted below," cried El Raton.

He led the way in haste.

The others followed, and at the mouth of the zig-zag shaft that led below they found and lighted torches.

By the time six or eight of these had been lighted, they were able to look about them and count noses, and one of their crew was instantly missing.

"Where is Rivero?" cried El Raton.

"He was on guard."

"Yes, but where is he now?"

"Be hanged to me if I know," said one.

And none of them knew, as was speedily ascertained.

"Go on down, all but you, Keegan," thundered El Raton. "We will look around here."

The others obeyed, and the boss of Terrible and the man he had chosen to remain with him retraced their steps in the direction of the huts.

Reaching the hut the queen of the Moquis had occupied, El Raton jabbed the point of his torch into the corner of the low roof of the adobe and drew a revolver.

"Now, curse you," he grated, "I want the truth."

Keegan had leaped back, and had a gun in hand likewise, but the other had the drop.

"What truth?" the fellow gasped.

"Where is Mercedes?"

"How the deuce do I know?"

"You do know."

"I swear that I do not!"

"You are the one who took her from this adobe."

"You have no proof of that; how do you know what you assert?"

"Do you deny it?"

"Yes, flatly."

"Where is that accursed Mexican?"

"I don't know."

"Are you and he not in this thing together against me?"

"Thunder! no! Do you suppose we would work against you, with such prices on our own heads? Don't be a fool, El Raton."

El Raton shoved his gun into his belt vengefully.

"There is one way you can prove your words, and that is by standing shoulder to shoulder with me in this fight."

"What fight?"

"With Chris Conover and his men."

"And that fight will begin right here, El Raton!"

There was a flash of light—electric light could hardly have dazzled them more—and between the two men, with one of his handsome guns pointed at each, stood Diamond Dick, Jr.!

And not only he, but the high priestess of the Moquis stood there with him, and the light was furnished by two urn-light cups she held in her hands, one near the face of one of the men and the other near the face of his comrade, while a huge rattlesnake swayed forward from her head, its eyes glowing like twin sparks.

CHAPTER X.

THE MESSAGE OF THE HOOP.

When the little band of man-hunters started across the plain toward the Mesa Encatada, Diamond Dick, Jr., led the way.

They were, as said, about to lay siege to the town of Terrible, now well assured in their own minds where that mysterious place was.

Like shadows they moved, with never a sound that would betray their presence.

In a little while they were under the deeper shadow of the mesa.

Here they halted.

"Now, youngster, what is to be done?" asked Chris Conover.

"That is a question to be decided," answered Bertie. "The first thing is to find that hoop of fire."

"What do you want that for? It has played its part."

"Has it?"

"Has it not?"

"We must see. Mercedes, daughter of the high priestess of the Moquis, can write, remember."

"Ha! I see. You look for a message."

"It will surprise me if she did not attach a word or two to that hoop, old man."

"Well, you have led us straight to the spot. Look around, boys, and see if you can find it."

"Don't see how we'll find it without a light," said Detective Lukens.

"Make no light, on your life," warned Conover.

"Then how will you read it?" demanded Ramons.

"Let's find it first," said Bertie. "Here, I will show you how. We will join hands, and move up and down here, feeling with our feet, and buttons to bullion we find it in less than two minutes."

This was done.

They had gone but a little way in this manner, when one of the men gave a signal agreed upon.

"What did I tell you?" Bertie demanded.

"You have got something in that thinker of yours, my boy," said Conover.

They let go of hands and pressed around the fellow who had given the signal, who had stooped and picked up a hoop out of the grass.

"Got it?" asked Bertie.

"You bet," was the reply.

"And what good will it do us?" demanded Lukens. "Can't see it without a light, and I don't see how it can contain a message anyhow, since it was all on fire."

"Thunder! that's so," agreed Conover.

"Keep your shirts on, you fellows," said Bertie, with a light laugh. "If it is written, we'll find it in a piece of wet hide, no doubt."

"And if it ain't writ, it is in Moquis," spoke up Sam Lerue.

Bertie had now taken the hoop, and was feeling of it with care, to find some sign or token attached.

"Nothing here in the shape of a packet," he said.

"Then let me have it," Sam requested.

It was handed to him.

Just as he took it, however, a sharp hissing was heard close at hand, and immediately the peculiar noise of a rattlesnake.

"Look out!" warned one of the men. "A rattler, by tarnation!"

"Chito!" a voice whispered, with a hissing not unlike that of the rattlesnake.

A dark, bent figure was creeping toward the mouth of the gloom.

Every man had a gun in hand.

"Make no sound," was further spoken.

"I heard the voice of a friend, hence I know you are friends."

"It is Hechicera, the high priestess of the Moquis," whispered Sam Lerue.

"Yes, it is I," was acknowledged, in Spanish, of course. "And it was your voice I heard."

"What are you doing here, old woman?" asked Conover.

"My child has called me."

"Then you saw the signal?" asked Bertie.

"Yes, yes. Hand me the hoop; I know you have found it."

"Here it is," said Sam. "There is Moquis on it, and you can read it better'n I can."

The high priestess took it eagerly.

"Yes, yes, the message is here," she quickly announced. "Seventeen men there are on the mesa, twenty horses in the corral, plenty of water, plenty of provisions."

"How the devil does she read all that in the dark?" demanded Detective Lukens.

"By feeling the knots, and the way the hoop is made," said Bertie.

"The mischief!"

"You trust Hechicera to read Moquis signs," said Sam Lerue.

"Entrance by means of a great boulder that rolls away from the opening," the old sorceress read on. "The signal is one long, sharp whistle, from a little hollow a distance from the boulder. Senors, the way is open!"

"By Heaven! she lies!"

It was Lukens made the assertion.

"Have a care!" cautioned Diamond Dick, Jr.

"Do you mean to tell me she can read such things as that here in the dark?"

"Why not?"

"It can't be done."

"Say, how do the blind read?"

"I know, but this don't stand to reason. What if she is leading us into a trap?"

"Not a bit of it," declared Sam Lerue. "Mercedes is there, and it is to her interests to save her. Besides, she hates El Raton worse than pizen."

As this was in rapid English, the old woman did not understand it.

"Chito!" she again cautioned. "Would you spoil all by too much talk? Be quiet, all."

"Silence," ordered Conover.

"Your ears have heard," hissed the old sorceress, in her serpent-like voice. "Some of you understand Spanish; let the rest be told. My child has run a great risk, and she must be saved."

"What is she hissing about, anyhow?" asked Ramons.

He was told.

"Was your daughter carried away by the Mouse?" asked Bertie.

"No, no, she went willingly. She has taken a great risk, but it was all for her lover."

"Durn et! he ain't her lover!" grated Sam.

"She means you," said Bertie.

"How am I to profit by the risk?" the cowboy asked, in Spanish.

"Why, she was the discoverer of the lost town—the hidden town called Terrible. She had heard that much reward was offered for its discovery, and had often expressed to me her desire to find it. Now she has found it, and she will claim the reward."

"And it is hers by right of discovery," declared Bertie.

"I guess that's right," agreed Conover.

"If she has only discovered that infernal Mexican forger I am after," said Lukens.

"And Jim Keegan, the counterfeiter," added Ramons.

"She has discovered the whole shooting match of them," said Bertie, "and it is for us to step in and corral them for her."

"There is likely to be a shooting match, sure enough——"

"Chito! chito!" hissed the old sorceress. "Why

will you all talk at once. Hear what more I have to say, and then to action."

"We listen," said Sam.

"It is well. I trapped El Raton for my daughter, and wanted to give her dagger the sweetness of draining his blood. He was helpless in her hands, and I remained in the background. Then I saw her riding away with him, and knew not what to make of it, for I had made his weapons harmless, and she was the master of the situation. I hastened me to the place where they had met, and there on a tree I read 'Mesa Encatada,' and I knew then she had learned the location of the city called Terrible."

"Good for you, old lady!" cried Bertie, in English—if a whisper can by any stretch be called a cry. "And now how about capturing them?"

"I am old," said the high priestess, "and the secrets of my people are all my secrets. I know well the Haunted Mesa, and there is one approach to the top known only to me."

"That is what we want," said Bertie.

"No, no, only I can go that way. The rest of you must await without until I roll away the boulder for you."

"I am going with you," said Diamond Dick, Jr., decisively.

"No, no, I go alone."

"No, you don't, auntie," in English. And then in Spanish: "You are old, as you say, and my youthful legs and arms will be of big help to you. Be two are better than one, anyhow."

"That is true, that is true. You are better than I may go."

"Bet your life I may."

"And what about the rest of us?" asked Conover. "We are leaning upon you, Diamond Dick, Jr."

"Why, I'll tell you what: You look around for that boulder, and get your men in position for an attack, and then find the hollow the old woman has mentioned and whistle."

"What for?"

"They may think it is one of their own gang, and open the gateway to you at once."

"Ha! a good thought. Then we can draw all their attention while you and the old squaw rescue the girl and cut off their retreat. It will be a dead easy capture."

"I don't know about that, but here goes for it. Come on, Hechicera, or rather lead on."

The old sorceress started, with all the caution she had observed throughout, and Bertie followed her as cautiously.

Like a prowling tigress she led him close under the base of the cliff, and along toward its northern extremity, until at last she reached a point where she stopped.

"This the place?" asked Diamond Dick, Jr.

"It is years since I have been here," was the answer. "Many changes can have taken place. Wait."

Bertie stood still, and the old priestess moved close along the end of the mesa as if feeling with her hands—as was the fact.

Presently he heard an ejaculation.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It is here; we are all right."

Bertie stepped forward to her side.

"Can you climb? Can you climb like a cat?" she whispered.

"Yes, like two cats, if necessary," was the response. "But you do not mean to say you can scale this mesa?"

"For a distance, yes. It must be done. There is no other way I know of. Follow."

"All right, go ahead."

The old sorceress began the ascent and Bertie followed as soon as she was out of his way.

There was but a slight hold for hands or feet and that was only a crack where a splinter of rock had cracked away from the main body.

Into this crack Bertie stuck his fingers and caught his toe, and he made as good progress as the old Indian priestess, at whose agility at her age he could not but wonder.

When they had climbed twenty feet or thereabouts, where the old Moqui stopped.

"Like hito!" that would it is it?" whispered Bertie.

In a little the top. When you reach here you will of the mesa.

"Then you are going to disappear?"

"Listen: It is a place that cannot be seen from below, owing to the split off portion being slanting. When you reach the top, climb over and slide to the bottom."

"All right, go ahead; if you can stand it I guess I can."

The next instant the old witch vanished.

Bertie climbed to the top, where he found that the crack suddenly widened into quite an aperture.

Climbing over the top of the outer portion, as he had been directed, he let go with his hands and went sliding down into the Stygian blackness that lay below.

Ten feet or so he fell and stopped.

"Well done!" said the voice of the high priestess. "You are brave, my son."

"Don't mention it, or you will make me blush," said Bertie, playfully. "We are here on business, so drive right ahead."

"Yes, at once, but now we may have light. Shield your eyes, so that I will not blind you, for the light will be at first very bright. Are you ready? Then behold!"

CHAPTER XI.

IN A TANGLE.

Mercedes, when she felt herself caught up and carried away the second time, had her pistol ready for business.

She fired at almost the same moment the arms encircled her, and the mentioned oath was the result, but she did not escape.

"Carramba!" cried her captor. "It is I, you wild-cat!"

It was the Mexican guardsman who had become her friend.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded, becoming quiet in his arms instantly, even encircling his neck with one of her arms. "I might have killed you."

"The wonder is that you did not. Quiet, now, and I will soon have you out of their reach."

She had a part to play.

Finding that she was in his power, she wanted his confidence.

She pressed him with her warm arms, and he returned the pressure as he ran with her in his embrace.

Straight to the opening that led to the depths below he ran, and at the edge of the opening stopped.

There was a moment's delay.

Mercedes then felt a swinging motion, for a brief second, and then there was a sudden shock.

"Fear not, loved one," said the Mexican, breathing passionately into her ear. "It was at the risk of our lives, but I resolved to die with you, if that was to be our fate."

"Where are we?" she asked.

"On a shelf on the opposite side from the stone stairs. And now I will take you to a safe retreat. I must be back before they can miss me."

He hurried her on through an opening in the rocky wall.

"Why will you go back?" she asked.

"Because we must have horses with which to make our escape."

"But I have not had my revenge."

"What revenge?"

"I would kill El Raton."

"Do not trouble your head about him, I will attend to that."

"Then you would strike the hand that has nursed your life while the hounds of the law were after you?"

"For your sake, yes."

She said no more, and in a few moments he put her down, at the same time kissing her.

"I leave you, love," he whispered, "but I will return. I need not ask you to wait for me, for you cannot escape from here without me. I will come, however, if I have to come to you dead."

"I trust you," she whispered.

He kissed her again, and was gone.

"Zorro!" she exclaimed, under her breath. "But not cunning enough to outwit the daughter of Hechicera, high priestess of the Moquis. Words of my mother's that my ears have once drank in, have never leaked out."

She struck a match, and its tiny flame lighted up her surroundings.

It was a cavern of moderate size, with only one outlet, that by which Manuel Rivero had just left her.

"The place has been described to me," she whispered to herself, "and now I see it as with my mother's eyes. Ah! had the people of old who perished here but known the secrets of their hill, it would not have happened. But, I suppose it is as mother has told me, that changes have been wrought since then that have opened the way to the mesa top."

She studied the place well while her match lasted. She was thus engaged when a sound came to her ears.

Listening attentively, she discovered that it was on the other side of the wall against which she was.

She pressed her ear against the wall.

Yes, some one was there. Was it friend or foe? Was she in greater danger than ever?

She had been searching for a secret keystone that would open the way for her into a passage that would lead to ultimate freedom if she sought that, or to the gateway that would admit her friends into the rendezvous.

It was the latter she desired.

While she listened, there came a grating sound as of two surfaces of stone in friction, and then of a sudden a brilliant light illumined her cell.

"Mi madre!"

"Mercedes!"

So the half-caste cried, and so was answered, even before she saw her mother or was seen by her.

The light had told her who was there.

In another instant the old sorceress appeared through a narrow way where the wall had parted, and she embraced her child with affection.

"I have found it!" the girl cried.

"Yes, but the wonder is that you live to tell of it, for you were in the hands of desperate men."

"And you!" Mercedes cried, at sight of Diamond Dick, Jr., who came into the cavern just a moment behind Hechicera.

"You bet," said Bertie. "Glad to find you kicking, for your lover, Sam, is just about a loon, so anxious he is about you, my wild rose."

"He shall soon see me, now, and we will be rich—rich!"

"This was your game, eh?"

There was a hasty exchange of information, and as hasty an arrangement for their further progress.

This ended, mother and daughter embraced again, and Mercedes passed through the opening that had recently admitted the sorceress and Diamond Dick, Jr., to the cavern.

"The gods preserve you, child," the mother called after her.

"And you, madre mia," came the response, and then Hechicera closed the hidden passage and conducted Diamond Dick, Jr., farther through the secret ways of the Mesa Encatada.

It seemed strange to Bertie that she should know all the passages as well as she did. Presently she put out the light.

This light has been mentioned as being contained in two urn-like cups, but these were really the two parts of one vessel.

By bringing the parts together the light was extinguished, and by separating them it sent forth its rays again replenished.

"You hear voices?" she asked.

"Yes," said Bertie.

"We are near the top. We must use caution."

She now took his arm and led him, and ere long they saw the stars overhead.

"Follow me," she now whispered, "but your life hangs by a thread here, if you so much as lose a finger-hold."

"Don't you worry about me," was the cool response.

It was, as she had said, scant footing, but making the best of every projection that presented itself he kept pace with his guide and they were soon out on top.

They were just in time to hear the altercation between El Raton and Jim Keegan.

El Raton leaped back, covering his eyes with his hands for the instant, for they were still smarting from the stinging cuts Bertie had given the scoundrel.

Keegan ripped out an oath, but he was powerless to defend himself, on the instant, for Diamond Dick, Jr., had the drop to perfection.

Almost in the same moment, however, the tables were turned.

Something icy cold was shoved against Diamond Dick, Jr.'s neck behind, and a voice cried in Spanish:

"If you value your life, don't move!"

But Bertie did move.

With a quick jerk aside, he wheeled in the fraction of a second and fired.

Manuel Rivero threw up his arms with a cry, and dropped to the ground like a log, but in the same instant something struck Bertie on the side of the head and dropped him.

Hechicera screamed and hurled one of her cups of fire at Bertie's assailant, but before she could do more El Raton had struck her in the face with his fist and she went to the ground senseless for the time being, and Diamond Dick, Jr., was left alone.

He had not been rendered senseless, and was struggling against Jim Keegan.

Bertie might have won, but El Raton threw himself into the balance against him.

"Curse you, die!"

With a big bowie, he made a slash at Bertie's throat.

"Fool!" cried Keegan, catching his arm. "What would you do that for, now we have got him?"

"To kill him, of course. Release me!"

"And so throw a cool hundred thousand, more or less."

"What do you mean?"

"You know he is rich; at any rate, you said so, and we can hold this fort and keep him for ransom."

"Well, there is something in that."

"A good deal in it, I should say."

"And what about the old hag?"

"Oh! cut her throat if you want to; she is of no use."

El Raton took a step forward with the good intention of performing that office for the high priestess.

As he put forth his left hand to grab her hair, while he used the knife with his right, however, the huge rattlesnake made a strike at him and planted its fangs into the thick part of his wrist.

El Raton let go his hold, and leaped back with a scream.

"What is the matter?"

"The snake!"

"You are bit?"

"Yes."

"Go for the bottle, then, quick!"

When Raton made a dash for the main adobe of the Like and Keegan sat down astride of Bertie.

that would you move, my chap," he ordered, "or I

In a little forego the pleasure of fingering your of the mesa. + drive with a bullet into your head to enforce order."

"You have got the call this time," said Bertie.

Meantime the whistle signal out on the plain had been heard several times, and now it sounded yet once again.

"What do your folks think?" demanded Keegan.

"Do they expect us to take them in as guests? Well, we intend to, pretty soon. They are only waiting below for El Raton."

"And my friends are waiting for him, too," said the prisoner.

"They will wait long, if that snake bite takes hold of him, but I guess he has still got enough of the Moquis snake antidote in his skin to offset it, with the aid of that rot-gut he has got in the house."

Bertie caught a movement on the part of Hechicera, at that moment, and he talked at a rapid rate to keep Keegan's attention to himself and so give her time to recover.

She was his only hope, he believed.

But he was mistaken in that, for he did not count the snake.

Of a sudden, Jim Keegan leaped up with a wild yell, and in the instant Bertie was on his feet, and the tables had been turned again.

The snake had wound itself around Keegan's leg, and he was dancing and kicking at a mad rate to dislodge it. At the same moment came shots and shouts in the interior of the mesa.

CHAPTER XII.

MERCEDES' BIG STROKE.

Mercedes, after passing through the opening in the rock wall of the cavern, made what haste she could with due prudence.

Ere long she heard the voices of men.

They soon became so plain that she could hear what was said, and in another moment light was seen.

The light came through a crack in the wall of the big cavern, and she looked down upon a scene of excitement.

There in the cavern where the horses were stabled the motley crew of El Raton were congregated, weapons in hand, ready to defend their rendezvous.

It was plain that they were waiting for their leader, who, as the handsome half-caste soon decided, was not with them, or he would be in their midst, or in front of them all.

She could not see quite all of the cavern from where she stood.

Passing on, she descended farther until the narrowness of the crevice she was in almost refused her passage.

After one hard squeeze, however, it widened slightly, and another step, then she found her way blocked by a face of rock of irregular shape and very rough.

"This must be it," she said to herself. "But it will be death if I open it suddenly. No, I must somehow draw their attention. Ah! a thought."

Turning, she pressed again through the narrow part of the crevice, and hastened back to the crack that commanded a view of the interior of the cavern.

Here she was almost directly over the stalls where the horses were kept.

Directly below was a heap of mesa grass.

Lighting a match, the half-caste let it drop through the crack and down into the heap of dry grass.

In a moment a tiny flame sprang up, another moment it was a success, and then its roar and crackle drew attention, and the interior of the cavern was as light as day.

The horses began to snort, squeal and plunge, and with mad oaths the men ran to the fire to try to extinguish it.

Farther back was a never-failing spring, and some of the fellows rushed away to that for water, but by the time they got back the heap of hay was a roaring furnace.

Mercedes had not waited to watch the result.

She heard the loud cursings of the men, heard

them accusing one another of carelessness, as she ran back to her post.

Coming again to the rough rock that barred her way, she tried her strength against it, but found that she could move it but a trifle. It was the gateway to the stronghold.

She was not at a point of vantage for its removal.

As she tried again, however, exerting her strength to the limit, she felt it move a little more, and simultaneously a great shout rose without.

The light within had been seen by Chris Conover and his men, and as they shouted they laid their shoulders against the huge rock and sent it rolling over upon its other facet.

So sudden was this, that Mercedes lost her balance and fell.

Down she went, with a scream, but one of the men looking up at her cry saw her coming, and caught her.

It was Sam Lerue.

"Mercedes!"

"Sam!"

That was all that could be said, for their work was not done.

All the advantage lay with the attacking party, for they were in the shadow, while the others were outlined against the bright glare of the fire and presented excellent targets.

Crack! crack! rang out Winchester and revolver, without and within, and for a few moments there was merry music in the air.

Then, with the heat behind them driving them into the open, where there was no chance for them, the outlaws threw down their guns and threw up their hands.

"Quarter!" was their shout.

The attacking party rushed in upon them, and in a few brief moments all were made prisoners.

Four lay dead on the floor, half a dozen were wounded, while of Conover and his detective band only two had been hit, and they not "hard."

The fire was now dying out, and Mercedes bid her lover follow her, and calling for others to follow him, she led the way to the mesa top.

By the dying fire, the way was lighted so that they could climb it quite easily.

Meantime, Diamond Dick, Jr., had brought things to a focus on top, once out of the hands of Jim Keegan.

At Keegan's cry, El Raton came out of the house, his homely face distorted with pain, and his gait anything but steady, gun in hand.

"Take that, curse ye!" he yelled.

It was a shot at Diamond Dick, Jr., but it went wide of the mark.

"I'll fix him for ye," cried Keegan, who, having dislodged the reptile, was ready for action again.

He raised his gun, but a snap shot from one of

Bertie's beauties rendered his right hand useless, and the gun dropped to the ground.

At the same time the high priestess of the Moquis leaped upon him, having come to, and she bore him backward to the ground with the fury of a tigress and held him there.

El Raton had fired twice more during this brief period, and one of the shots had come unpleasantly close to Bertie's head, and the young invincible now wheeled about and let go at him with both guns, two shots as one, and the arch knave "took a tumble."

Bertie had not fired to kill, however; he had merely made a carom on the fellow's cranium with his bullets.

He then lent aid to Hechicera, and Keegan was quickly rendered helpless.

The melee below had been raging meanwhile, but had now died out, and with a look at Rivero to see that he was still in the land of dreams, Bertie called to the high priestess and ran to the opening where the smoke from the burning grass was ascending.

Hechicera, having secured her snake and recovering her fire cups, followed after him, and when they reached the opening the firing had ceased.

They were silent for a time, while they listened to learn how the fight had gone.

This they soon knew by seeing their friends ascending.

They remained at the mesa till morning. It had been a hard siege, and not one of them but was tired.

On the morrow they took account of the results upon their return to Winslow, point, taking the dead and prisoners with them.

Detectives Lukens and Ramons were happy men, each having the man he had set out to corral, and others were equally well satisfied for the same reason.

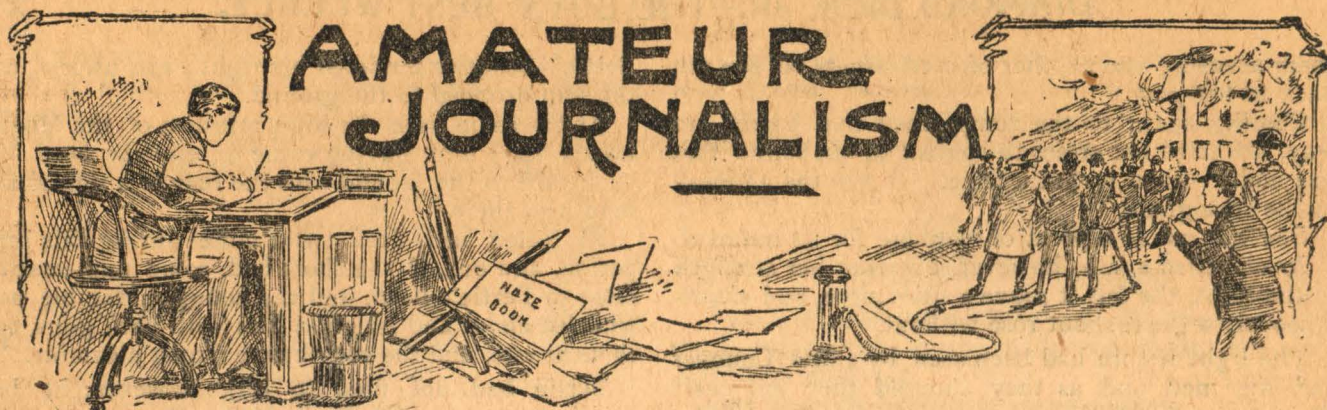
Chris Conover was happiest of all.

Mercedes and Sam were married, and she was present at the Peralta-Reavis trial in spite of plots and schemes to the contrary, and being an important witness, her evidence carried the suit. Her mother returned to her place with the Moquis, where she will end her days.

El Raton died, after a day or two of great agony, from the effect of the bite of the rattlesnake. All the rest of the cutthroat band got their just deserts, and Mercedes got her reward for having been the first to get the true location of the town of Terrible, where took place the terrible twist-up it has been our pleasure to tell about.

THE END.

Next week's issue (No. 297) will contain "Diamond Dick, Jr.'s Black Box; or, The Secret of Half a Million." Bertie had a hurry call on this case, and it was a case of hurry up from the start to the finish. Look out for a daisy story next week, boys.



"Gle-ory ter snakes and all hands round! It's a rip-roarin', rattlin' side-winder. The best contest yet. Wake up, contestants, an' crawl to'ards trouble!"

That's something like what the old Serpent of Siskiyou said when he heard of this last contest, boys. He knows a good thing when he sees it, too.

Just look on page 31 if you want to know all about the contest, boys.

Let everybody get into it—the more the merrier. The fish are biting well this year, and every one of you wants one of those fishing outfits. Every one of you has a chance to get one, too.

Vic Vincent's Victory.

(By Bertie H. Ward, Mass.)

There was great excitement in the village of Quemada in the northern part of Cuba.

Colonel Felipe Cabello, a Spanish officer, had been challenged to a duel by Vic Vincent, a handsome young American. The two had had a quarrel for the hand of that wonderful girl, Inez, a beautiful young Cuban girl, some time ago.

In a little ring where so many bull fights had taken place, cleared for the occasion and a vast multitude of men, women and children had gathered round to witness the fight.

The contestants now entered clad in tights, showing off their forms to perfection, and, what a contrast! One large, muscular and bulky; the American lithe, sinewy and graceful.

Both men were expert swordsmen. At the signal both contestants came together, their swords clashing furiously. The Spaniard took his sword and made a fearful lunge for the heart of his antagonist, but found his thrust easily parried.

Cabello started out to play with the American, but found his lunges met with all the touch and skill of an expert. He fought with all the skill and fury he knew, but was met in all his attacks and held at bay with ease.

Until now Vic had done nothing except to defend himself, but now he began to force the fighting. An angry look appeared in his eyes as he attacked Cabello.

The Spaniard's sword was sent flying through the air, but, strange to say, he caught it deftly as it came down and offered it to Cabello hilt first.

This only made his rage worse and he made one mad lunge for the heart of the boy.

Now it seemed as though Vincent was aroused, for he attacked the Spaniard with such vim and fury that he could not stand up against it, and he was driven back to the very edge of the ring. The young American's sword was glittering and flashing everywhere.

Cabello realized that he was completely at the mercy of Vic and believed that he intended to kill him. Then he dropped his sword and cried for mercy. The Spaniard fully believed he would be cut down, but nothing of the kind happened.

"Coward!" cried Vic, scornfully, "I will not stain my sword with your treacherous blood," and he turned and left the arena.

How the motley assemblage cheered, for the young American was a favorite with them all!

In due course of time pretty Inez Ramirez and Vic Vincent were made man and wife. Later Vic brought his beautiful wife to the United States to live.

The Reward of Sin.

(By Ralph Burnhart, Ohio.)

On the night of September 21, 1881, two men on horseback were treading their way up one of the narrow passes of the Cumberland mountains in Kentucky. Their horses looked tired and worn out, as did the men, for they had had but little sleep for almost a week.

On the fork of their saddle could be seen Winchester in readiness it seemed for some game which might chance to pass them.

This was not the reason, though, but these men were men hunted day and night by officers of the law. These are the men who murdered the watchman and dynamited the safe of the Merchant's Bank in Nesterfield, Kentucky, on the night of September 14, 1881, escaping with almost \$100,000.

The explosion aroused the people, and they took their trail and kept them fleeing day and night ever since. They lost their trail in the gulch of the mountains, but found it again, as we will soon see.

As these two men go up the mountain to a secret cavern to hide in they were engaged in a conversation which runs as follows:

"Jim, do you think we have escaped these hounds of the law?"

"Yes, Jack, I think we threw them off the track back at the gulch, and, do you know, I am glad we are so near a resting-place. We have been driven from place to place till I feel almost like giving myself up."

"No, no, Jack, we will soon be at a safe hiding-place where we can rest for a while and then leave for parts unknown."

"But, Jim, think what it has cost us. Put murder on our hands, and if captured we'll either be imprisoned for life or hanged."

"Well, we are here now, for here to our right is the entrance, well concealed from view, where we must stay until we can escape."

"Jim, do you know, I wish I had never entered such an enterprise. If my mother knew it it would break her heart. And, Jim, if they come upon us I would rather throw myself from this cliff than be taken back a prisoner to disgrace the name of my mother."

Entering the cave, they build a fire and cook some meat which they have and make their meal on that. They then go out and turn their horses loose to graze and rest.

Returning inside, they wrap themselves up and go to sleep in their blankets, little dreaming it will be their last sleep on this earth.

In the early morning could be seen just outside the cave about ten men ready to enter the cave to capture these men. They separate, entering different ways.

Jim awakens with a start. He hears a noise, and awakening Jack they get up and look around, when about twenty-five feet back in the cave comes the command:

"Hands up or we fire!"

"No, you cannot capture us, we die fighting!"

Then comes the sharp crack of a gun and Jim falls pierced through the heart. Jack seeing his comrade fall determines to avenge his death, opens fire, killing one man and injuring several others, then dropping his gun, dashes through the entrance, thinking to escape, but runs into the other men outside. Drawing his revolver, he fires right and left, but see, he cannot escape. He runs, it seems into one of the men's arms, but dashing him aside and with one wild yell jumps from the cliff to instant death.

Jack's body was never found, and Jim's body and the other man's were buried there on the mountain.

The money was found inside the cavern and returned to its rightful owners.

So ends the career of Jack Banks and Jim Hunter, and so will end the career of many more who are engaged in such desperate undertakings.

Such is the reward of sin.

A Narrow Escape.

(Marsden Tucker, Punta Gorda, Fla.)

It was late in May, 1901, when I took my fishing rod and went fishing on a big trestle about three miles from my home and which crossed a deep and rapid river about a mile wide. I had been fishing about thirty minutes and had caught six or eight big trout when I heard a low, rumbling sound in the distance, like a train coming, but as it wasn't time for the train to come, I did not think it was the train, so went on fishing and never

thought anything more about it till I heard the whistle of a train and saw the train coming out on the trestle running like a racehorse.

It was too far to the other end of the trestle for me to get there before the train did and the cross ties only reached about foot on each side of the track, and if I had jumped into the river I would have been dashed to pieces on the rocks. So there was but one thing for me to do and that was to hang over the side of the trestle while the train passed, so I laid my rod along the side of the track and then took hold of the ends of two cross ties and hung under the trestle while the train was passing. But all of a sudden I lost my hold and fell into the river fifty feet below.

I don't know how it was that I didn't get killed. I guess it was because I fell in a deep place, where there wasn't any rocks. I managed to get to the shore all right, but then the question was how to get on the trestle again, the banks being too steep to climb up, so there I was. The nearest place to get up was two miles from the trestle, but as that was the only way to get out I had to go there. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when I got back to the trestle where my rod was, and I got it and set out for home.

When I was about a quarter of a mile of the house I met my father and mother going to hunt for me. I had to tell them the whole story, and I found out later that the train which had come so near running over me was a special which was to run on that road for a few weeks. I never went fishing on a trestle again.

A Young Detective's Case, No. 2; or, The A Guilty One.

(By Louis Baldouski, C)

On the 23d of January the following letter was received by me from the little town of W——.

"A. C. and William Sical, two murderers, are making their way to your city."

The description was given. They were both of the dark hue and I thought over it before starting on this case and decided to try it, and having the descriptions planted in my memory I hunted up the name Sical in the local directory and found it at the address C street.

I took a south-bound car and got off just before I got to C street to avoid suspicion. I retired to a dark alley, and using some stain I stained my face a yellow and donning a celestial wig I was Su Kung, and made my way to C street and found the number, which, to my luck, happened to be a store. I went into the store and asked if there was a "manee namee Sing Cong," and they answered in the negative.

While in there, William Sical came in—the very man I was looking for, but as I had no weapon I could not take him. I left the place and went back to the office. It was then ten p. m., but I did not stay there long, but went in search of my assistant, Burton, and found him in the hands of the police disguised as a negro, so I let the police on to him and they let him go.

I then gave him instructions and retired to sleep, for I had a mean job for the morrow. About four a. m. I heard a noise but did not rise to see what it was, but lay as if I were asleep. It sounded like the rasping of a file. I turned over toward the window and in the setting

moonlight I could plainly see the figure answering the description of A. C. Sical. I let him file ahead, as I slipped my hand to the bell connection between my room and Burton's, and pressed the button five times, which meant: "To the front window noiseless."

At last the filing ceased altogether, and the window was softly raised. When it was up the heavy form of the murderer was in the room. I raised my revolver and said:

"Adam Sical, you are my prisoner," just as Burton grabbed him from behind. I slipped a pair of handcuffs on him and tied his feet. I then sent Burton for the police, and Sical was locked in a cell. That morning I set out to find William Sical, but as I was nearing C street I was grabbed, and with a sharp pain on my cranium I fell, left for dead.

When I came to I was lying in my room where I had been two hours. I felt better that evening and decided to take up the chase again, and went out to M road and having found a comfortable seat, I was not there long before Burton came panting up to me saying that Sical was coming.

We lay low. Along came Sical on a seemingly worn-out, half-fed old horse. When he got up to where we were concealed I cried:

"I want you, Sical," and threw a revolver in his face as Burton slipped the bracelets on him. The murderers were sent back to W—. The 25th of this coming May the little town of W— will have a double hanging and two more sinners will end their lives, tempted by a devil.

when

Like **Western Adventure.**

that would (By Ollie B. Vesey, Texas.)

In a little about thirteen years of age my father told of the mesa. I went out to his ranch the next trip. Being only a boy with great ideas of course I was delighted.

We were to start in one week. So I began buying little things to take with me.

I had a small .32 Winchester, so I bought several boxes of cartridges. I supposed I would have to kill redskins, robbers and most every other thing. Of course, I bought me a small .38 S. & W. revolver, for I thought I would have to shoot several cowboys.

Finally the week ended. It had seemed like months to me. But the time had come. So I kissed my mother and all good-by, gathered up my guns and other things and we went to the depot and was soon rolling West.

Like most boys I expected the train to be robbed several times, so I kept pretty close to my father. Finally we reached the end of our journey. As we stepped from the train some of the cowboys from our ranch met us and we were carried out to the ranch. It was a grand sight to behold thousands of cattle roaming over the wide, rolling plains. The next day I went out with some of the cowboys on the plains away out from the house. Of course, I got to boasting of my good riding. One of the cowboys finally said:

"Say, little pard, let me see yer ride this pony."

The little mustang was standing there looking as harmless as a kitten, so I thought I could certainly ride that horse. When I put my foot in the stirrup I noticed he rolled his fiery little eyes at me, but of course I did not know that meant trouble. So I leaped into the saddle. I had not got firmly seated before he bowed his

back and began bucking. About the first jump I went heels over head out into the grass. It jarred me up a good deal, and made me feel kind of sick. That set all the cowboys to roaring. After I sat around a short while I began to feel better, directly the cowboys began some more of their sport. They would lay a handkerchief on the ground then ride back seventy-five steps and ride at full speed toward the handkerchief. When just even with it they would lean over and pick it up.

If I was delighted and thought I would try that myself, so I dropped my handkerchief, then I rode at full speed toward it. When just over it I swung down to get it. Instead of getting it I slipped and fell, one foot hanging in the stirrups. Away went my little mustang across the plains, me dangling from the stirrup. Of course, I would have been killed soon, but one of the cowboys soon caught my horse. I learned that in a few days some cowboys were going over to the nearest town (about ten miles) to buy some groceries, so I begged my father let me go. He consented, but told me to be very careful.

We started the next evening about two p. m. The first thing I heard after reaching town was a big drunken cowboy declaring himself a "roaring catamount."

There were several fights during the day, all of them being fought with revolvers. Of course, the result of every fight was that some one was either killed or very badly wounded. I was standing on the porch in front of the grocery store when directly a big, half-drunken cowboy came up to me and declared that he was a terrible roaring catamount with two heads. He drew his gun and began firing at my feet, yelling "dance, tenderfoot." I danced until he shot every cartridge from his revolvers, so you know I was pretty tired, not to say scared to death.

I never thought of my gun once while the cowboy was having fun with me. I was thinking of but one thing, and that was to keep from getting shot.

As soon as the cowboy passed on I hurried away to where the cowboys that I had come with were. As soon as they learned of my "little dance" they all began to laugh and called me "tenderfoot."

I was very glad when I got back to the ranch, I must say. Next day I went out for a little hunt by myself. I went down along the creek and shot some rabbits and small game. As I was returning I saw a big bull eyeing me closely, so I thought it would be wise to put my horse to a gallop. No more had I done this than the vicious-looking fellow started after me. As it happened, my horse was a pretty swift runner, but the ugly old beast kept right at the horse's heels in spite of the speed. On and on we flew. I had about given up when I saw some cowboys coming toward me at full speed, rope in hand. I saw then I would be safe if I could make my pony hold out a little longer. Finally the cowboys and I met. The bull was very close now, so one of the cowboys sent his rope over the mad demon's head. I was very glad and was scared nearly out of my wits. I went home and my father said we would return home in a few days. I can truthfully say I was not anyways sorry. I did not fancy such races.



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